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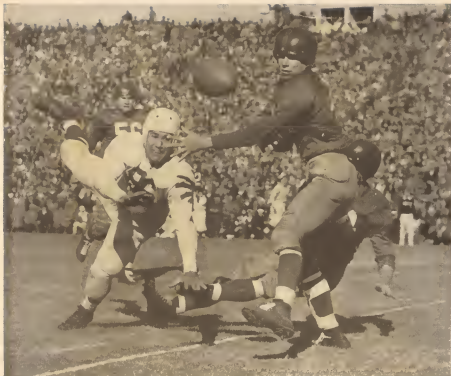
Novelet of an Enslaved Universe
by EMMETT McDOWELL

Earth was dead. But Earth might bloom again,
fed by the blood of that hard-shelled Cain . . .

THE DEAD-STAR ROVER

A Startling Novel by ROBT. ABERNATHY

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PLANET STORIES



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Winter Issue, 1949



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The Dead-Star Rover

By ROBERT ABERNATHY

Only savage engines roamed that arid world, charging one another with snarling guns beneath those grinding treads. And two puny machine-less humans like Torcred and Launa should die quickly. That they suddenly could become the most dangerous things alive must surely be some dead god's joke.

THE TERRAPIN WAS TRAVELING eighty miles an hour—far too fast for such uneven country. Over maddeningly repetitive dunes it scudded, rising with a swoop to each windward slope and hurtling clear of the ground beyond each wave-like crest, to plunge through the trough in a hurricane of flying sand.

The wiry little man who crouched tensely, hugged by a padded safety belt, in the pitching, vibrant interior of the midget combat car, was impatient, furiously so. Thanks to an unusually stubborn case of engine trouble, he was a full two hours behind the rest of his troop; by now they must have sighted the new camping



Torcred struck viciously, denting the man's helmet.

place on the shore of the Salt Sea. And the blazing sun was already sinking toward the dusty horizon haze. Torcred the Terrapin came of a people unused to fear—but his shrewd intelligence, calculating the risks he must run before he rejoined the others, found the daylight dangers enough and to spare, and nothing attractive in the thought of an encounter with any of the things that prowled the desolate plain after the sun went down.

So the terrapin fled at reckless speed westward over the dipping dunes, and Torcred's deepset irongray eyes, squint-

ing against the glare that even the polarized glass in the narrow vision slits could only cut down, were anxious. Under his breath he chided his own nervousness; probably after all nothing would happen . . .

MIDWAY in the thought it did happen, and with almost catastrophic suddenness. The black silhouette of a flying thing materialized out of the sun's glare, diving straight at him. It flattened out and was gone overhead, while the roar of its passing echoed behind it. And the

terrapiin had rocked to the impact of bullets all the more fiercely driven by the aero's terrific velocity; its armor rang and steel splinters hummed like wasps inside it.

Torcred slammed down one foot pedal and the terrapiin slewed crazily and slid sidewise for a score of yards, in a cloud of sand that momentarily hid it from the eyes above. Coming out of the skid he gave full power to the spinning wheels, operating the throttle with one hand while the other switched on his radar screen and leaped from it to the firing control of the turret gun. It was long seconds before the scanning beam located its flitting target; then, though the terrapiin was traveling in the quick swerves and dashes of a desperately evasive course, the automatic control held the image reasonably well centered on the projected crosshairs of the turret gun's sight. The image swelled, grew wings, as the aero came in in a second howling dive.

Torcred's reflexes, hardly less automatic than his machine's, depressed the firing button, and the gun's stammering blast numbed his ears, mingling almost at the same moment with the clang and shriek of steel on steel as the terrapiin took more hits. But the flying enemy leveled off far higher than before and zoomed away more steeply; its great advantage had been lost when the first attack failed to cripple or kill.

The Terrapiin's eyes burned into the screen as his own wild zigzags flung him painfully against his safety belt. The aero might let things go at that . . . No, the screen's image expanded again. His finger closed once more on the firing button.

The winged outline grew with ominous determination. Careless now of the single gun that rattled defiance, it was coming down for the kill. With the corner of his eye Torcred saw the vicious puffs of sand that strode to meet the racing terrapiin; he swerved instantly, but in that same instant the car staggered and spun out of control. He had not heard the thunderous concussion that stung his face and hands. The forepart of the roof bowed inward, and there was a knife-like fragment of steel, inches long, in the cushion almost touching Torcred's ear.

Dimly he realized that his wheels were spinning futilely, the car canted far over; it had nosed into a dune and half-buried itself. The fight was over . . .

But ten, twenty seconds went by and no fresh storm of destruction burst on him. Incredulously his eyes found the radar screen. It was still working, and the image that filled it wavered strangely, neither receding nor coming nearer.

He threw his machine into reverse and opened the throttle; the front wheels took hold and the terrapiin bucked itself free of the sand. Then Torcred leaned sidewise, recklessly flung open a steel shutter and looked out.

He blinked, dazzled, at the sweep of desert and bright blue sky before his eyes found the falling shape, twisting and fluttering as it fell despite its weight of tons. As he watched, the aero almost leveled out, teetered on one wing and sideslipped out of sight behind a distant dune. A cloud of dust sprang up and drifted away, but no smoky death-pall rose after it.

THE Terrapiin shook his dizzy head, and his narrow hawk face hardened. He pressed the pedals and sent the combat car rolling swiftly toward the spot that his practised eyes had marked accurately in the midst of the featureless desert.

The black-and-yellow aero's nose was sunk deep into the loose sand that had slid down to partly bury the wreck, its blunt tail pointed into the cloudless sky it had left forever. One wing had been torn off and hurled yards away, the other was crumpled beneath the slanted fuselage.

The terrapiin slowed to a crawl along the crest of the nearest sandhill as its pilot surveyed the scene. But he was about to wheel away once more when he noticed the sprawled figure in bulky dark-blue flying clothes, that lay face down in the shadow of a brown drift.

Defly Torcred sent the terrapiin careening down the slope to halt close to the motionless enemy. He hesitated briefly, then, shrugging, unsnapped his belt, wrestled open the almost-jammed door and clambered out. Dead or stunned, he had to make sure, and there was no harm in indulging a trifling curiosity.

Under the remote blue curve of the sky, he shrank into himself a little. It was always so outside the steel shelter of the terrapin in which he had spent most of his days since childhood; he felt an oddly naked helplessness. But he looked down with interest on the body, his hand gripping the haft of the broad-bladed knife at his side. He had never before seen in flesh and blood a member of the lofty peoples of the air.

As if roused, the limp form twitched a foot, shivered, and rolled over with a sigh. A pale face, closed eyes were upturned to the glaring sun and the startled gaze of the Terrapin. Startled he was, for the face was a girl's.

She could not have passed twenty. In spite of the heavy coverall worn against the stratosphere's chill, and a wide strawberry mark where her left cheek had met the sandy soil, she contrived to be pretty. No more—but the terrapin women were brown and sturdy and coarse-featured, hardened by the drudgery of the camps.

This girl's face was very white in the frame of dark hair that escaped the over-size plastic helmet. She breathed slowly and fitfully, and Torcred guessed at a state of shock; she might be badly injured.

He shook off an unaccustomed indecision and knelt beside her. His face was unpleasantly hard as the knife slid from its sheath with a faint whisper, as he laid its thin edge along the exposed curve of the girl's throat, where a flutter marked the great artery. One quick slash, she would never wake . . .

But it was as if a restraining hand fastened on his wrist. Slowly he drew back the glittering blade and returned it to its place. He stood up and scowled down at the still, slight figure, brushing sand savagely from the knees of his heavy breeches.

Angrily Torcred told himself that he had only to turn and go. The desert would finish the job, and no one would know that his courage had failed him. But still he stood and stared, not consciously admitting his strange desire to know the color of the eyes behind those closed lids.

They were blue, he saw as they flickered without warning. Not cold sapphires, but the living blue of a desert sky or of

electric flame. They were alive as a small bird's eyes—but of course Torcred had never seen a bird. Rather, he called the girl a bird, as he called himself a terrapin.

Still he did not move, even as the bird-girl struggled to a sitting position and gathered her feet under her. Dismay came into the blue gaze fixed on him; she half raised a hand as if in defense.

AND Torcred's determination slipped again. "You are my prisoner," he announced in a hollow voice that did not sound at all like a victor's.

Without answering, the bird-girl sprang nimbly to her feet; then her mouth twisted with pain and she swayed dizzily, but her eyes never left Torcred's expressionless face.

"You are the terrapin?" she gasped. Her voice had the exotic accent of the bird-people's speech, and in her inflection of the word "terrapin" rang a contempt that was like a whip across the face. She glanced swiftly about, at the boat-shaped gray machine that crouched, purring, like a waiting animal on its six wheels some yards away, then at the broken wreck that had been her aero. Her eyes went wide with a blue flame of horror and regret, and her right hand darted to her side.

Torcred exploded from rigidity into action; his feet dug into the sand as he lunged, and his hand closed on the girl's slender wrist, halting the sharp point of her dagger an inch above her left breast.

Her free hand struck viciously at his hastily averted face. The Terrapin ground his teeth and twisted her wrist mercilessly until the long knife fell among their scuffling feet. Then he thrust the girl away and set his foot solidly on the weapon, pressing it into the sand. He glared at her deadwhite face.

"I said you're my prisoner. That means you'll live while I want you to!"

The bird-girl was trembling uncontrollably. "My ship is destroyed," she said in a stifled voice. "I am already dead. It is the law."

Torcred's black brows knitted in anger—at her and at himself for the impossible situation into which he had blundered. "Get yourself another aero," he growled

unreasonably, knowing the truth of what she said. On land or in the air, the code was the same. With destruction of the fighting machine, the poor, soft being of flesh did best to perish too. He snapped, "Be quiet and do as I say. Come along!" He half turned toward the waiting terrapin.

The girl stiffened. "Well!" she said on a note of cold, controlled scorn. "You crawlers keep slaves?"

That was absolutely untrue, and was exactly what was bothering the Terrapin. His people kept no slaves and took no prisoners. He barked, beside himself: "You will obey me! Or stay here and die—slowly—of thirst."

Her lips parted as if to retort, but her gaze slipped past Torcred to sweep the remote horizon and the dun wilderness that stretched to it without path or landmark. In the two expanses of sand and sky there was no life visible. The thin shoulders under the heavy flying suit seemed to sag.

"All right, terrapin," she said with weary disdain. "You win, for the time being."

II

THE LITTLE MACHINE HELD two well enough; married terrapins on the march carried their wives beside them and children stowed somehow and anyhow in the rear compartment. Torcred snapped the catches of his safety belt and motioned the girl to do the same; when she was slow to obey, he leaned over and fastened the belt himself, drawing it painfully tight about her slim waist. Then the engine's hum rose as he opened the throttle; the wheels spun and gripped, and the terrapin bounded away, bearing westward over the dunes. As it picked up speed Torcred was touched by the familiar sense of power and mastery in the deep throb of the motor and the ready surge of the armored car. But he brooded darkly as mountain and desert rolled past in monotonous succession, as the minutes heaped themselves into hours . . .

The sun was a redhot disc descending into a bath of fire in the west. And

minute by minute the angry light crept higher up the sky and assumed new forms, clouds and streamers, for it was a mighty redlit pall of dust that was ever higher and nearer to the rushing terrapin.

Torcred glanced sidelong at the girl beside him. Her face was even whiter under the harsh light of sunset, her eyes closed beneath long lashes. Watching that smooth, tragic face, Torcred realized again how young she was; he shook his head somberly. The air people were a strange race, who sent their young females on missions fit only for grown men. The terrapins were far more sensible.

But no terrapin woman had the strange beauty of this alien creature from the sky . . .

Presently he said, "Look. Ahead."

The girl's eyes opened listlessly. They were dark-blue, opaque. But faint interest stirred them as she scanned the view ahead.

The flaming dust cloud had climbed to the very zenith; the smell of it was in the terrapin, its feel between the teeth. Miles ahead across the desert, a dim encarnamed shimmer marked the waters of the Salt Sea.

Nearer, but still far ahead, a black stream was moving across the rippled plain at right angles to the terrapin's course. It was without beginning or end, pouring steadily from north to south. A distant vibration seemed to shake the earth beneath the sway and swoop of the moving vehicle.

"The trailer herd," said Torcred. "Thousands on thousands of them, moving south with the sun that feeds them. The fall migration is farther west this year, and they are coming in greater numbers than any of our troop can remember."

The girl said nothing. He added irritably, "You understand—there will be good hunting."

She shocked him by laughing. "Is that all you think of?" she inquired mockingly. "Good hunting—a full stomach and a full fuel tank. You crawlers lead poor, empty lives."

"We don't crawl," said Torcred shortly, eyes fixed on the speedometer that registered a hundred miles an hour.

The bird-girl laughed again. "You know so little, you earthbound creatures," she

taunted. "You've never known the joy of flight—to climb up and into the clear bright stratosphere, and see the Earth with all its secrets unroll below you . . . *You* creep from place to place and cower in your camps, but we range farther than you dream, and know the world and all its peoples that fly and swim and crawl and burrow. And we are the highest race of all."

"Higher than the buzzards?" asked Torcred.

She hesitated, then said defiantly, "Of course! Those evil things are huge and powerful, but we'll defeat them in the end, never doubt it. And then—we will have the rule of the sky, which is the rule of the Earth."

She sounded very certain, and Torcred could think of no adequate counter-argument. He said brutally, "We? Who do you mean? *Your* wings are clipped, bird!"

Then unexpected remorse stung him as he saw how the girl shrank into herself, how the brief glow of enthusiasm left her face. She made no answer, and Torcred too fell sullenly silent.

IN SILENCE he closed the throttle and the hurtling terrapin slowed. Close ahead, now, the trailer herd was an amorphous black river in the gathering dusk. Earth and air shook to its thunder, the rumbling of countless wheels and engines and couplings and the strident bleating of thousands of horns as the vast herd jostled and protested.

Closer and closer to the flank of the moving mass rolled the little terrapin, darting over the crests of the dunes and stealing along under their cover. The girl's eyes grew wide at the glimpses they had of that dark dangerous-looking stream; she seemed to flinch from its pounding clamor.

Torcred smiled grimly as he brought the terrapin to a poised halt half-sheltered by a low swell. A scant hundred yards away the migrating trailers rolled obliviously past, one close behind the other, huge box-like monsters on wheels behind a tiny cab. Torcred knew their ways of old; the trailer sections housed women and children, who tended the apparatus that

made food, fuel, and ammunition from sunlight and water and air and the minerals extracted from the sterile soil. The trailer-men were drivers and gunners; but the great machines were clumsy and ill-armed, finding safety against the fierce mechanical predators chiefly in their numbers.

The Terrapin waited only for moments; then he opened his throttle wide and sent the little combat car swerving into the heart of the herd.

All around rolled rumbling iron giants; the clank of couplings, the roaring of unmuffled engines were deafening. A hooting of furious horns arose as the terrapin darted and zigzagged between the moving units of the herd. But there was no blaze of gunfire.

"So we hunt them," Torcred flung over his shoulder at the breathless girl. "They can't shoot when we're in among them; we disable one and shelter behind it until the herd passes on . . ."

The terrapin dashed through narrowing gaps, slowed and spurted again, as Torcred threaded his way skilfully on an oblique course across the roaring stream. At last he saw open ground ahead; he grinned exultantly and put on a final burst of speed that carried him into the clear. The little car swooped with a sickening rush into a shallow valley, and behind it thundering flashes leaped along the flank of the trailer herd and bullets exploded around or ricocheted screaming overhead.

As he slowed to a more moderate pace under cover of the farther dunes, Torcred turned, still grinning, to the bird-girl. "That," he commented, "was the dangerous part."

She shivered slightly. "I was afraid," she admitted candidly.

"That's hardly as simple as attacking a mere crawling terrapin from the air, eh?"

The girl turned her face away. "That was necessary, terrapin . . . I passed my fledgling examination only two days ago; it was my second flight beyond the safety zone. The novice must defeat some machine of prey in single combat, before he is accepted."

"And if he fails?" Torcred's eyes were fixed ahead, where a pale light was reflected by the ground that was flat now

and gleamed whitely, encrusted with salt. "And if he—or she—fails," the girl's voice dropped low, "it is the last time." A sob came into her voice. "Even if I could go back to my people, I would be degraded to menial labor or breeding—could never fly again."

Torcred felt pity for her despite his prejudices; and at the same time her words recalled his own worries, and he frowned blackly. The girl mistook his expression for an indication that she had somehow said too much, and she sank back into brooding silence.

She glanced up only when the car's wheels ground to a stop on the salty crust, and Torcred, with a relaxing sigh, was already unsnapping his safety belt and switching off the panting motor. The girl saw flames and shadows amid which black figures moved, and she shrank back in fright, uncomprehending. As the Terrapin flung open his door, mingled sound of clanging metal and hissing fire rushed in to increase her confusion.

He paused momentarily; his expression was unreadable as he gazed on her white face.

"Stay where you are and make no noise," his low voice rasped sternly. "I'll come back."

Torcred closed the door firmly and heard its lock click. The girl, if she foolishly wanted to escape, probably could not find the catch inside, and there was nothing she could hurt herself with if she still felt suicidal. There at least she would be safe from prying eyes, until he could untangle the tumult of unaccustomed emotions that were struggling within him. A terrapin had only one place to himself, the interior of the fighting machine—those with families, of course, knew no such word as privacy.

He turned, straightening his back resolutely, and advanced into the midst of the terrapin camp.

III

SPACED SHADOWS RESOLVED themselves into a double rank of parked terrapins, forming concentric circles about the encampment. Such was the

pattern of a terrapin camp from time immemorial; it was safety against attack by other raiders of the wasteland, and on each day one ring could go forth to hunt, the other remain in place to guard the women, the young, and the booty.

Even here the warm night air quivered ever so faintly with sound from the east, the endless motion of the great trailer herd. By morning it would have passed, and the hunters would follow it southward.

Within the great circle the women and older children were busy now, while the men lounged about, talking quietly, boasting perfunctorily of the day's deeds. The first day's hunt had been only a hit-and-run affair at twilight, but in the midst torches flared sputtering over the remains of dismantled trailers; there were neat piles of steel beam-lengths and undamaged armor plate, and sprawling heaps of metal scrap that would be abandoned when the troop rolled south. To one side a red glow came from the maw of a small furnace, melting aluminum to be made into castings; the terrapins did not smelt steel, leaving that to the giant scavenger machines that followed the herds at a more respectful distance. Fuel, food, and usable ammunition had naturally been transferred first of all from the captured trailers to the tanks and storage compartments of the terrapins.

From the shadows of the inner circle a voice hailed Torcred by name, and its owner came out into the light to meet him—a short man, unusually plump for a terrapin, with heavy black eyebrows that seemed pasted high on his round bald forehead, giving him a look of perpetual astonishment.

He greeted the newcomer effusively. "My dear Torcred! We came very near giving you up! And from the look of your machine, you must have had a narrow squeak."

Torcred frowned imperceptibly. It seemed an evil omen that he should be met by the only one among his fellow-terrapins whom he actively disliked—Helsed, the talker, who was always close to the chief's ear in council, but far from his side in the battle.

"That's right," admitted Torcred curtly,

and started to brush past the other and his brimming questions. But he found himself face to face with another terrapin who had risen from the shadow, a taller man whose hair shaded from the usual black into gray, and whose face was permanently lined in a stern expression of command. He was Vazcled, the chief. Torcred fell back a step and inclined his head in salute.

"What happened to you?" inquired Vazcled quietly.

"I was attacked," said the younger man with reluctance.

"By what?"

"An aero."

Even the chief's face showed surprise, and the listening Helsed's eyebrows went up steeply. Vazcled said, "You are lucky to have escaped so easily."

"I didn't escape. I shot it down."

Helsed exclaimed aloud and stared at his brother-terrapin enviously. The chief's withered lips smiled. "Such victories are rare," he said approvingly. "I know of only two or three in the past fifty years. You must tell us the story tonight, and Hiyik can make a song of it . . . Did you bring any trophy from the wreck?"

Torcred licked his lips nervously. "No," he said. "It fell a long way off . . ."

"Well, no matter," the chief shrugged. "We will find the spot on the back trail." Already—Helsed, the eager newsbearer, had dashed off without waiting for details—they were surrounded by a growing audience, afire to know more about Torcred's almost unheard-of exploit.

TORCRED, dazed, found himself sitting atop someone else's machine, relating his battle with the aero to an enthusiastic mob of his fellow-warriors. The terrapins lost their customary reserved poise and grew festive; while Torcred almost choked on the lies with which he ended his narrative, they pressed food and drink on him and made him go back over the most stirring parts. Then Hiyik the poet had his turn, and retold the story in improvised verses, his chanting voice mingling with the hiss and clangor of the workshop in the midst of the circle on whose rim the warriors were gathered.

But the hero of it all sat moody, well-nigh oblivious, his brow wrinkling painfully from time to time. The thoughts he was thinking hurt. For what he was planning was treason, what he had already done was treason—more than that, sacrilege, abomination, a trampling of the laws that kept the diverse races of Earth eternally apart . . . Lesser breeds might hold such laws lightly—but not the proud terrapins. For them all other peoples were enemies, or prey, or vermin beneath contempt.

The bird-folk were enemies. And the crime of giving aid and comfort to an enemy deserved the ultimate in punishment.

Torcred's mouth tightened grimly at the thought, and the logically following reflection that he, Torcred the Terrapin, must have gone quite insane. But even here, in the midst of his noisy comrades, he could not forget the glimpse of a strange beauty that had fallen out of the sky to destroy him—if not by the swift vengeance of outraged tradition, then by returning and returning to haunt him all his days.

With a chill he realized that the chief was watching him thoughtfully, and he strove to give his features a dignified impassivity appropriate to the modesty of the fated hero.

The face of Helsed, hugging the spotlight as always, was at his elbow, wearing a vapid smile which Torcred's hypersensitized suspicions saw as a knowing smirk. And in reality, he knew, the fat terrapin's air of loud thickheadedness masked a sharp scheming brain—and Helsed hated him. Helsed had talked and toadied his way into the graces of the council of elders and the chief, and he had hopes—the latter's successor must be chosen soon from among the younger men. And in the taciturn Torcred he saw his most dangerous rival, for the young warrior's deeds spoke for him.

Sunk in thought, Torcred hardly realized the passage of time or that the gathering was breaking up. Hiyik had ceased his recitative. One by one the terrapins yawned, stretched, and moved off toward their own vehicles; it was late, and tomorrow, first full day of the great hunt, would be hard. The noisy labor in the

camp's center went on unabated.

Torcred forced himself to yawn and stretch as elaborately as the others, to rise unhurriedly to his feet. His plans, such as they were, were complete; during the next day's farflung maneuvers and attacks on the trailer herd, he should be able to slip off unnoticed and, traveling fast, reach the vicinity of the aeros' nearest eyrie. There he would leave the bird-girl. Whatever her fate then, she would be alive among her own kind; and perhaps later she would be grateful to the terrapin who had befriended her. Beyond that his thoughts did not go . . .

As he started to walk away, the chief's voice rooted him to the spot.

"Wait a moment. I understand your machine was damaged; perhaps it needs immediate repairs."

TORCRED turned swiftly toward him. "No!" he exclaimed hastily. "There's not much damage—a few bullet holes, a dent. No use bothering with it now."

"You never can tell." Vazcled rose; despite the hour's lateness the wiry old man seemed untouched by fatigue. The bright eyes that dwelt on Torcred's face held only friendly concern. "You are confident now; but a failure of mechanism can betray the bravest. Let me look your terrapin over and judge for myself."

The chief's wish was a command. Torcred's spirit quailed as, walking like an automaton, he led the way. He derived a little comfort from noting that Helsed had already disappeared; when worst came to worst, he would at least be spared, in the moment of disaster, the sight of his enemy's triumph . . . And he could still hope that the chief would content himself with an outside examination.

Vazcled studied without speaking the stove-in nose of the terrapin. His experienced hands felt out the damage that was invisible in the uncertain light; he clicked his tongue.

"That's no dent," he said at last. "You ran headon into a shell. I'd better look at it from inside; open the door."

With wooden fingers Torcred produced the key. Silently he handed it to the chief; he did not think, in that whirling moment,

of the symbolism of the action, but Vazcled stared at him curiously before turning to the door. For a terrapin to surrender the key of his vehicle was a gesture of abject self-humiliation.

The simple lock clicked. Torcred fell back a step, his shoulders hunched tensely and his hand convulsively closing on the haft of his dagger.

The door swung open. The chief fumbled and switched on the inside light; he grunted softly, squinting up at the fore part of the roof. Past him Torcred could see the whole cramped interior of the armored car; it was empty.

Across the chaos of his mind fluttered one clear thought; the girl had escaped. And he was at once limp with relief and taut with a new and formless fear, mixed with an odd empty sense of loss.

Vazcled grunted again, emerging. Pressing the key into Torcred's damp palm, he said pointedly, "Keep that."

Matter-of-factly he added. "You need repairs. Drive into the center, then look up somebody with room for an extra sleeper. You won't be called for guard duty; you've earned a good night's rest." The chief's wrinkled hand rested affectionately on the young man's shoulder, but to Torcred's imagination it burned like fire.

His mumbled response was swallowed by a sudden burst of noise from the outer periphery. A voice and then voices cried out confusedly, and then a light blazed, silhouetting the parked terrapins. And Torcred was already running among them, but even as he ran his world was crashing and crumbling about his ears, and he knew he had been most cruelly mocked by fate.

ON the edge of the encampment a space of sand was white in the glare of lights. White too was the face of the girl who swayed, fast in the grip of two men. Others pressed round with flashing knives, and more warriors, half-dressed and sleepy-eyed, appeared to reinforce them. They looked questioningly at one another; somehow the appearance of a lone alien being, with no machine in evidence, was more sinisterly alarming than would have been the onslaught of a horde of armed

and armored juggernauts.

Torcred halted and stood rigid, his gaze stabbing into the knot of men. And before him they opened out, pushing the girl to the fore, as if in accusation. The next moment he realized that that was because the chief stood beside him. And he saw that one of the bird-girl's arms was pinioned by a sentry, and that Helsed, puffing himself with menace grasped the other.

"Silence!" roared Vazcled's voice of command. "Bring her nearer. Where did she come from? What is she?"

No one answered at once. Torcred's eyes were on the bird-girl. For a moment her gaze met his, then she looked past him. On her pale face was written the fierce pride he had seen before, and he knew she could never betray him.

"Shall we make her answer?" Helsed grinned ingratiatingly at the chief, and as if in demonstration of the methods he proposed, his grip tightened on the girl's arm, twisting. She winced and closed her eyes, making no sound.

And Torcred, his remnants of caution whirled away like chips on a flood tide of fury, was on the torturer in one catlike spring. He would have used his knife, but he had forgotten it; his fist, with all his weight behind it, crashed squarely into Helsed's hateful grin. Helsed was hurled backward and rolled over limply on the sand.

Torcred stood watching him, poised to renew the attack. The other man who had been holding the girl involuntarily released her and stepped back, leaving her standing alone beside Torcred—but she too shrank away from him; his berserk rage had made him terrible. The surrounding warriors hesitated, and behind them, from among the cars or from vantages atop them, the women and children stared open-mouthed.

In the stunned silence, Torcred could hear the whisper of night wind, and from far away the faint mutter of gunfire as nocturnal machines of prey still took their toll of the trailer herd. He had other random impressions: the feel of the soft sand underfoot, the hard brightness of the stars overhead, the odor of fuel and heated metal that hung about the camp.

Then he turned, straightening: his eyes

sought out Vazcled beyond the ring of men who were warily beginning to close on him. And he laughed, having cast away his world.

"See, chief!" he shouted. "See, terrapins! I brought home a trophy, after all!"

IV

IT WAS A RED DAWN, FOR THE sun rose behind the dust that still hovered over the track of the southbound herd. In the west the sky was dark blue above the flatly shimmering water of the great dead sea.

The whole terrapin tribe, save for the indispensable lookouts, was assembled in the open space of the ringed camp. A hush lay on them as they gazed on the prisoner in their midst—honored last night among his peers, this morning guilty of hideous treason. There was no need for trial; it only remained to condemn him.

A cool, salt breeze blew from over the lake and stirred Torcred's tousled black hair. His gray eyes were bloodshot and staring.

Helsed was there, insinuating himself into the council of elders at the chief's elbow, and mumbling implacable hatred past swollen lips and missing teeth. His clearest and oftenest-repeated word was "Death!"

Vazcled's face was set in sorrowful lines; there was regret and a hopeless question in the old man's eyes as they met Torcred's.

A small voice beside Torcred asked, "What are they going to do, terrapin?"

He half turned and really saw the girl for the first time that morning. She was composed, her blue eyes unafraid.

"I don't know," muttered Torcred. "This has never happened before—not in anyone's memory." In his mind were horrific legends heard in childhood, but he tried not to repeat those even to himself.

Vazcled's first words were to the girl. He asked, "Who are you, stranger? What is your race?"

She returned his gaze, decided to answer. "My name is Ladna, and I am of the race of birds." Torcred realized that he had not known her name before; it had not occurred to him that such remote

beings used names . . .

"Who brought you to this place?"

The girl's lips tightened; deliberately she turned her back on the chief and stared away over the lake. She seemed oblivious of all the hostile eyes around—in particular the swarthy faces of the terrapin women reflected unpleasant ideas as they greedily ogled this creature of the air.

"No matter," Vazcled said heavily. "The criminal stands self-accused . . . Have you any explanation of your conduct, Torcred the Terrapin?"

Torcred shook his head dumbly.

"Then—" the chief turned to the elders, "there is question only of the punishment."

Helsed thrust himself forward eagerly. "Death!" he mouthed. "Such a crime deserves no less!"

The chief looked at him coldly. "Did I ask your advice?" he inquired bitingly.

Helsed beat a retreat. "I am sorry . . . But it is true that I have a special grievance in this matter . . ."

"Be quiet!" snapped Vazcled.

The oldest member of the council spoke, and the rest listened respectfully. "Everyone knows the story of Fuwu, who took to himself a dragon woman. He was cast out of the tribe according to the ritual, and left to die in the desert with his seductress—a sentence lighter and heavier than mere death, and one which did not stain the hands of the tribe with the blood of a terrapin."

The other judges nodded in token of their remembrance and approval of the precedent. The chief saw their decision, and faced the prisoners again. At this curt command the guards seized Torcred and thrust him forward unresisting. Vazcled, knife in hand, looked him in the eyes, his face a stern formal mask. He intoned:

"Torcred the Terrapin, your sin is past forgiveness. I pronounce you outcast and abhorred; none shall take notice of you any more, either to help or hurt. You are no longer one of us; we give you to the wilderness. Torcred, no longer Terrapin, I mark you as such!"

The knife point rose and made two quick motions. Torcred did not flinch; on his forehead was a tau cross in oozing drops of blood. The chief bent, took a

pinch of sand, and rubbed it into the wound to make sure that it would scar—if the victim lived that long.

Vazcled turned away. "Cast them out!" he ordered over his shoulder, to the guarding warriors.

"The girl too?" Helsed asked hastily; his eyes lingered.

"Of course!" rasped the chief. "It is the tradition—and what else should we do?"

Helsed licked his battered lips nervously. "Of course," he agreed. "What else?"

V

TORCRED SAT, HEAD SUNK limply in his hands, on the white salt beach facing the lifeless sea. The throb of motors and swirl of dust behind the departing terrapins had died down in the south; instead of hunting today as planned from this camp, they had left the spot become accursed. And Torcred sat numb with despair, passively waiting for the end.

Near him Ladna, the bird-girl rose to her feet. She looked in the other direction, out over the lifeless waste of sand, and then at the man's slumped, motionless figure.

Her voice was hard and scorn-edged. "So—a terrapin shorn of his armor is less than a bird clipped of her wings?"

Torcred raised his head and looked at her glassy-eyed. "You heard," he growled. "I'm not a terrapin any more."

"You'll always be a terrapin to me," she said. "A miserable, beaten crawler."

He stared without understanding. Around them was the thirsty, deadly desert; the sun was hot already, his mouth was dry, and the poisonous sea lapped mockingly at its flat shore. The girl had been ready to die when her aero crashed—but now her slender body was vibrant with the will to live.

But her bitter words could not fail of effect. Torcred stumbled erect and snapped, "I'm not beaten until I'm dead! But—what chance do we have?"

She accepted the *we* with a faint smile, and said in a softer tone, "There is an aero eyrie—not my own, but one with

which we have friendly relations—about seventy miles east of here, in those blue mountains you can see. Perhaps we can make it there on foot.”

“That’s all very well for you,” said Torcred somberly. “But for me—what could I expect from your people?”

“We are not so narrow-minded as the terrapins. We see more and tolerate more. You can be taken in and given tasks to perform in return for your keep.” She frowned at his doubt, and explained further, “Some day—soon—we birds will rule all the Earth. And we do not want to wipe out all the other races; we’ll preserve them to do the jobs that must be done on the ground, and all of our people will be free to fly.”

The picture of conquest she painted so naively repelled Torcred, reared in the terrapin tradition of a barbaric individualistic freedom. “You offer me slavery,” he said harshly.

“No, no,” protested Ladna. “According to our law, you will be free to leave if you wish.” He snorted. “And—” she hesitated, “I will be in the same condition, now that I have lost my wings.”

Torcred stared at the ground, shrugged. “It’s better than dying here—perhaps. And we may not make it. How fast can one travel on foot?”

“Ten miles an hour?” the girl hazarded.

“Less than that, I think. It will be a long way—and I know of no water holes.” Ladna shook her head at the question in his glance. “It may be impossible to walk that far without water; I never heard of anyone’s doing it. But we can try.”

THE blue flat-topped mountains still shimmered unreally, far away as ever, across the heated plain. The sun was at its height and the sand was blistering. The two huddled in the scant shadow of a dune. Both were sunburned, maddeningly thirsty, and discouraged. They could not have covered more than a dozen miles before the heat had driven them to seek shelter.

They talked very little; as the burning midday dragged on, Ladna slept for a time. When she woke she looked round feverishly, and a moan escaped her lips.

“What’s the matter?” asked Torcred.

“I was dreaming,” the girl said in a choked voice, and, shockingly, two tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Don’t cry,” ordered Torcred harshly. “We’ve got to conserve all possible moisture.”

She bit her lip, and no more tears came.

When the shadows lengthened somewhat they set out again to the east. During the morning they had seen some signs of life—had flattened themselves on the ground while a cavalcade of fire-breathing dragons passed one by one along the crest of a distant ridge, the long snouts of their flame projectors thrusting before them, and had skirted a colony of the queer crusty pillbox people who had sacrificed mobility for an almost invulnerable security. But during the long afternoon the desert seemed utterly empty. Only at dusk they saw, far over head, three vast black shapes flying in wedge formation, and the drone of motors beat down out of the hollow bowl of the sky.

“Buzzards!” whispered the girl, and shrank against the sand.

Torcred knew that the buzzards were the aero people’s hereditary foes, but that did not seem adequate to explain the bright bitterness of hatred in the girl’s eyes . . . He was about to ask a question, when his eyes caught movement in the near distance and he froze, mouth open.

A hundred paces ahead on the way they had been going, atop a low mound, stood a figure—a man in queer garments, not identifiable with any of the races Torcred knew. When the Terrapin tried to make out his face, the man seemed to waver in the fading light; then he raised a hand in a gesture beckoning them toward him.

The bird-girl, back to the apparition, looked wide-eyed wonder. Torcred croaked wordlessly and pointed; and with the motion the stranger was gone from the ridge.

“What’s the matter?” asked Ladna puzzledly.

“Nothing,” Torcred managed to get out. “The shadows play tricks . . .”

As they crossed the rise, Torcred halted to tie a bootlace that didn’t need tying. There were no tracks in the soft sand. Torcred remembered fearfully what he had

heard of the visions that heralded death by thirst—but even sane people saw things that weren't there, such as the phantom lakes that had mocked them in the midday heat.

But he had been sure that vision was looking at him . . .

Two or three miles further on, it was almost dark. Torcred sank wearily down in the lee of a high ridge. "We'd better stop here. Perhaps a night's sleep will give us strength."

The girl sighed. "I think we will die on this desert, terrapin."

Torcred felt a stirring of the anger her use of that word always roused in him. But he said only, "We've covered perhaps a third of the way. Two more days, then."

He remembered that pebbles in the mouth ease thirst; they tried that, and it helped a little. Then they scooped hollows in the sand for sleep. Ladna wriggled out of the heavy flying suit that, stickily uncomfortable as it was, had protected her from the sun. The sleeveless shirt and shorts she wore beneath clung damply to her; even through a haze of exhaustion Torcred was stirred by the sight of her slender body, her mildly rounded breasts and long straight legs . . .

He slept like a log, and woke in the dim pearly light before dawn, still tired, his mouth like a furnace.

IT WAS a moment before he realized that the bird-girl's piercing whisper had wakened him, and sat up abruptly. Spots danced before his eyes; he felt her hand tighten in warning on his arm.

Then he saw by that ghostly light, not a hundred yards away, a thing of nightmare.

It was a huge gray monster of metal, a moving fortress going steadily forward on endless treads that hardly dented the soft sand beneath it, though it must have weighed half a hundred tons. Shod with silicone-rubber, it rolled in an unreal silence, the purr of its engine scarcely audible in the early hush, past the two frightened watchers under the dune, and vanished over another crest.

The girl still clutched Torcred's arm, finding perhaps some flimsy reassurance in

the resilient hardness of his tensed muscles. "What was it?" she gasped.

"That was a panzer," Torcred informed her in a low voice. "A big relative of the terrapins, that prowls the desert alone, by night. It carries a crew of three to six, can see in the dark and move without a sound. It's one of the most formidable land machines in the world."

Ladna drew a shuddering breath. "I hope it doesn't come back."

"Don't worry. I told you it was nocturnal—at this hour it's hunting a good safe spot to lie up for the day."

The girl was wearily pulling on her coveralls; her fire-blue eyes were clouded with hopelessness as they gazed into the gray dawn. "Perhaps it would have been better if it had seen us—better than what's ahead of us."

Torcred did not answer; he was frowning in thought. Suddenly he rose to his feet—wincing a little as he put his weight on them; with gentle firmness he turned the girl around and faced her toward the west, suggesting, "Let's go back a little way."

"Back! Are you crazy, terrapin?"

"Remember the wreck of an armadillo we saw about a quarter of a mile back? I want to get something there."

"That wreck was years old," sniffed Ladna. "There couldn't be any supplies left in it."

"I have an idea," said Torcred. Then, as he saw her unyielding disbelief, "I intend to capture the panzer."

And he trudged off purposefully to the west. The girl followed, still protesting in an undertone, as all their argument had been carried on. "You *are* sunstruck! That monster—and we've not got so much as a knife— You might as well try to tear down that mountain peak," she pointed toward a distant blue height, wreathed in cottony clouds, "with your bare hands."

"Maybe I will," said the Terrapin.

THE smashed armadillo had long since been stripped of usable parts by the desert's scavengers. The remaining wreckage was widely strewn, half-buried in the sand and eaten by rust.

Torcred searched with a grim intensity,

tugging at the projecting steel ribs. Some were deeply buried, others too badly bent, still others too short. At last he found what he was looking for; a narrow T-beam, six straight feet of alloy steel, light but tremendously strong. He hefted it with satisfaction.

"You don't intend to attack the panzer with that!" exclaimed Ladna.

"I do," said Torcred. He looked into her wide blue eyes for a moment, then pointed down at something that had been disturbed when he pried loose the beam. A chalk-white skull with empty eyes. He kicked at it, and it crumbled. "Of such are we made, bird-girl. A fragile framework compared with the machines'. But alive, we have intelligence, and with intelligence and this weapon I mean to take the panzer."

They tramped eastward again, following their own tracks, under a sun already growing hot. After a while the girl asked in a meek voice, "How can you hope to do it?"

Torcred smiled inwardly at the impression his—largely assumed—confidence had made. He answered, "This morning I noticed some of the thing's weaknesses."

"It didn't look weak to me."

"In the first place, its guns are set high on that huge frame—above the housing of the treads. They couldn't hit a man standing right beside it. And I think I can get that close to it, because it will be resting now, the crew asleep—or one of them may be watching, but he can't watch all ways at once. There will be automatic alarms, of course, but I don't think they'll respond to anything as small and harmless as a lone man."

Ladna drew breath sharply. "Perhaps you're right—But even so, what then? You can't dent its armor with that bar, and it can simply move away and shoot you down!"

"It has another weak point. It runs on caterpillar tracks—that is, really, on wheels turning inside an endless belt that gives a wider basis of support. But if any sizable, hard object finds its way between wheel and track—"

He paused significantly, and the bird-girl's eyes met his in a luminous dawn of

understanding and hope.

They had no trouble finding the trail of the panzer. As he scanned those yard-wide tracks, paralleling each other ten feet apart, Torcred's grip tightened on his T-beam; it did not seem quite so thick and heavy now, against all those tons of rolling metal might.

But he had boasted recklessly, and he was going through with it if it killed him.

VI

STEALTHILY THEY CREPT along the trail in the direction the monster had taken, lying prone to peer with immense caution over the wave-crest of each dune it had breached in crossing.

Beyond the sixth or the seventh crest, it was there. Lying still in a hollow of the sand, its gray paint blending with the drab earth to make it almost invisible from the air—and its radar alarms, no doubt, keeping watch for any moving threat. Encased in armor almost to the ground, over the great treads, and its three rounded turrets astare with guns.

At first glimpse Torcred jerked his head back like the extinct land reptile whose namesake he was. His palms grew sweaty and his insides quivered. If he had been alone, he might have slid quietly down the slope and stolen away, leaving his T-beam behind him. But he heard Ladna's quickened breathing at his back, and knew she knew he had seen the panzer.

Before he could check her she had wriggled up beside him and peered over the edge. When she drew back her face was shades paler beneath its peeling sunburn. Her lips framed words: "Are you going to try?"

Torcred nodded, jaw set. "You stay here," he hissed, and, gripping his weapon, began to slither over the crest of the dune.

When he was on the far side and nothing had happened, he felt reasonably sure he had passed below the horizon of its radar. But he continued to crawl, eyes fixed on the giant enemy, watching for the first stir of motion about it that would be followed by a smoky blast of death.

Halfway there— Almost there— He reached the edge of the panzer's shadow.

Then he distinctly heard a low burring sound from inside it. Alarm! A magnetic mine detector, probably, tripped by the metal beam; Torcred realized that even as he flung himself forward in a scrambling rush that carried him the rest of the way.

The driver must have been alert. Even as Torcred caught himself with a hand against the gray steel flank, the muffled motor throbbed into life and the great machine surged forward.

Torcred ran stooping beside it, eyes measuring the gap between armored housing and racing tread. Seconds to live if he missed—already his lungs were bursting and the great gray side was slipping past. With both hands he drove the T-beam straight into that gap.

It was wrenched from his hands, its end snapped off and hurled spinning with terrific force. Then a grinding shriek of tormented metal, and the panzer's vast mass shook and wheeled half round in a storm of sand as the jammed tread stopped and slid.

Almost before the machine had lurched to a full halt with a tremendous clank and rattle, Torcred had snatched up the broken end of his bar and was swarming up its side.

In a moment he was perched atop it within easy reach of the single exit port, leaning against the smooth warm steel, feet braced solidly against the tread housing. A quick glance assured him that there were no vision slits giving a view of the panzer's back to those inside. He set himself and waited, controlling his labored breathing.

The wait was not overlong. The panzer-men, seeing no attacker outside, but having heard their alarm and found their machine inexplicably crippled an instant later, had no choice but to come out and investigate.

THE port-cover swung aside, and a man's crash-helmeted head and gray-clad shoulders emerged, back to Torcred. The Terrapin struck viciously and dented the helmet; almost before its top slid out of sight, he vaulted after it into the opening, disregarding the ladder.

He landed in a tangle of arms and legs—the man he had stunned sprawled atop

another who struggled to free himself. Torcred sprang clear and, across the cramped central compartment of the panzer, faced a third gray-clad man with a drawn knife.

Incredulity and fright were written large on the panzer-man's face. Out of sheer desperation he lunged forward in a stabbing rush; but he was no knife-fighter, and the two-foot length of steel in Torcred's hands was a far superior weapon. The knife flew wide and its wielder stumbled back, nursing a bruised forearm.

Another figure appeared in the narrow door forward and stared at the scene with popping eyes—the driver, no doubt. Torcred greeted him with a ferocious grin and swung his club whistling back and forth. He looked and felt invincible.

Then Ladna's voice behind him screamed, "Torcred! Look out!"

He whirled, and the knife-blade gashed his shoulder instead of sinking into his back. Then Torcred struck a two-handed blow and felt bone give way beneath it. He took a couple of steps back from the crumpled body of the panzer-man who had unluckily disentangled himself from his unconscious comrade, and set his back against a solid bulkhead; on his face was still the savage grin that had frozen the driver in his tracks.

The bird-girl dropped lightly from the ladder and came to his side, scooping up the knife that was red with Torcred's blood. Her shining eyes reflected his fierce elation of victory.

Torcred realized that if he lost time his psychological advantage might go with it. He snapped at the two remaining panzer-men, his voice rasping strangely from his dry throat, "Quick! Do you want to live?"

They stared at him dumbly; it was almost beyond their power to grasp that this bloodstained, primitive being had got inside their defenses, that the far-ranging guns whose breeches thrust into the compartment were useless.

Torcred took a step toward them, swinging his bar ominously. The man who was clutching his right arm asked sullenly, "What are you? What do you want?"

"I am Torcred," and he added with brief thought, "the Terrible. And we want very

little from you—food, water, weapons from your stores. You can keep your lumbering panzer; we've got no use for it." The two men exchanged fearful glances, sure now they had to do with a mad creature. He gave them no chance to think it out. "Right now, we want to look around in peace. Ladna! Find something and tie them up."

The girl, dagger in hand, opened the door of the rear compartment; a whimper of terror came from the darkened interior, where two women and an indeterminate number of offspring hugged one another in paralyzed panic. Ladna spoke to them with a soothing softness that amazed Torcred, rummaged inside and came out with a coil of strong wire. The solitary panzer, an economy in itself, carried a little of everything.

UNDER the menace of Torcred's club, the terrorized panzer-men submitted. Then the two invaders found the machine's provisions, and satisfied first their raging thirst and afterwards the hunger that had been forgotten in the face of the greater need for water. But Ladna broke off eating to bandage Torcred's slashed shoulder with strips torn from a gray garment.

It was then he remembered to scold her. "What did you mean," he demanded between bites, "by rushing in here, after I distinctly told you to keep in the clear?"

Her blue answering gaze held an impudence that was a new thing to him. "I saw you had stopped it, Torcred the Terrible, so I came. And—where would you have been if I hadn't?" Her strong slender fingers closed for a moment painfully on his wounded shoulder.

He was silent, remembering with a queer excitement what her warning cry had been. "Torcred!" not "Terrapin!" . . .

The bandage finished, he stood up and said brusquely, "We'd better get ready to leave."

"You plan to go on foot again—now that we've captured a machine?"

"It's the only sensible way," asserted Torcred flatly. "Neither of us knows how to repair the caterpillar tread, or, if we managed that, how to maneuver and fight

the panzer; if we were attacked, it would be a death trap for us. Afoot, we're in very little danger—what machine of prey would be likely to consider us worthy of notice?"

They looted the best of the provisions, and the girl's deft fingers fashioned for each a strap of sorts from a roll of cellotex fabric. Torcred went up to the driver's cabin, located the engine under the floor, and did things to it that would keep the panzer immobilized until long after the blowing sand should have covered their traces. The woman could untie their men as soon as they gained courage to come out of hiding . . .

Terrapin and bird-girl set their faces to the east and began to trek again. They trudged on with lightened hearts.

They had gone about a mile when a fold of the land revealed a wide swathe of desert dotted with camouflaged steel hemispheres, mostly buried in the sand—a big colony of the pillbox people.

They ducked back behind the shelter of the sand-hills and began what looked like the shortest detour. Suddenly Ladna, glancing back the way they had come, cried out sharply.

Torcred turned, and saw a plume of dust above the far-off dunes—then a gray scurrying beetle-thing that rose to a crest, vanished, and reappeared on a nearer swell.

It was a terrapin, travelling fast, and as it raced closer there was less and less doubt that it was following their own plainly marked trail. Torcred strained his eyes through the heat-shimmer to make out the identifying mark on its blunt nose; he stiffened, and his hand dropped to the knife he had taken from the panzer.

"Helsed! He's picked up our trail somehow—but what does he want?"

"The fat terrapin, the one that twisted my arm? I think I know," the bird-girl said in a low voice.

Torcred's dark face went hard as flint. His mind seethed: there was no hiding here, no use trying to flee from the hundred-mile-an-hour pursuer—or was there?

Uncertain, he stood stockstill. The girl pressed shivering against him. Helsed would not open fire, of course, for fear of hitting her; there might be a chance of

parleying. If he could only lure the fellow into the open—

The Terrapin swung broadside-on a stone's throw from them. Its door opened, and Helsed half slid out of the seat. He eyed the pair, swarthy brows rising in seeming amusement.

"Ah, still together," he observed. "Torcred, my dear fellow—you shouldn't be traveling in such company, even in your present status. Suppose you run along and let me take care of her."

Torcred controlled his voice with an effort. "*You're* a terrapin in good standing, Helsed. Would you discard your honor—"

The other smirked. "Don't worry. I'm not a fool like you; I won't take her home with me."

Torcred ground his teeth. "You're crazy!"

"I had to leave the hunt and make good time to catch you—I don't feel like being disappointed." The viciousness in Helsed's smooth voice crept into the open. "And I have a score to settle with you anyway." He jerked the terrapin's door shut, and its nose gun started to swing around.

Torcred spun and ran, crouching, knowing the girl would follow. They plunged over the dune-top close together; the terrapin's gun wavered and did not fire, then its motor snarled into life and it bounded after them.

Torcred, with Ladna close behind, ran panting down the windward slope, straight toward a cluster of domed, sunken structures. Sheer amazement of the pillbox-dwellers must have kept them alive so far; every moment he expected a murderous barrage.

It came. The nearest pillbox erupted flame, and beyond it others. The explosions rolled flatly, echoless across the desert. Torcred caught the girl round the waist and flung her down beside him; hugging the ground, he raised his head slightly and looked back.

The terrapin swerved agilely among spouting columns of sand. Then all its wheels left the ground at once, it tilted in the air and rolled over and over down the long slope of the dune. Black smoke poured from its punctured armor.

TORCRED STARED LONG AT the blackened wreck, hardly noting that the guns were silent, the haze settling. He knew none of the exhilaration that had been his when he took the panzer; a sickish sensation nested in his stomach. He had killed—by subterfuge, true, but killed all the same—a brother terrapin, and now in his own mind rose up against him a lifetime's training, all the blood-ties with his own kind . . .

His own kind. The terrapins. But were they? *What was he?*

The breeze, laden with sharp smoke of explosive, made his eyes twitch and smart. He blinked, and saw the man standing on the dune's edge above them. Much nearer this time, so that there could be no doubt that the eyes were looking at him, that the lips smiled. That smile, and the careless stance that went with it, seemed to radiate confident power.

Beside Torcred the girl gasped, and he knew with sudden relief that she too had seen the stranger.

And so did the others. The bright air was split again by thunder as some touchy pillbox fired a shell. It struck squarely at the stranger's feet, and they saw him blown to fragments. But the burst drifted down the wind, things crawled and flickered in the air, and he was there again, smiling more broadly than before. He glanced aside, at the smashed terrapin, then back at Torcred, and raised his right hand in a gesture—thumb and finger forming a circle—that some of the desert peoples used as a sign of approval and encouragement.

Then he rippled slightly, like a reflection in water, and was gone.

Torcred was hardly conscious of how they squirmed out of range of the pillbox people's venomous annoyance. Ladna, brushing tangled black hair out of her eyes, was first to break the silence.

"Was that what you saw yesterday?"

"Uh-huh," admitted Torcred glumly. "But you saw. He wasn't real at all."

"Did we see the same? He was blown to bits, and reassembled himself unhurt?" Torcred nodded. "Then there was some-

thing there."

"What?" he demanded, irked by her superior reasoning.

"I don't know . . . But I remember something. A month ago, a man in strange clothing like that—a real man of flesh and blood—came to our eyrie. No one knew where he came from, or where he went when they laughed him to scorn."

"They laughed—why?"

"Because he talked about 'civilization' to every one who would listen—but he didn't seem to realize that the civilization of the air is necessarily the highest. And he said we should make peace with all other creatures—even the buzzards!—and refrain from hunting, and practise photosynthesis like the lesser races." She wrinkled her peeling nose. "If that weren't enough, he mixed his talk with old legends—stories of the ancients, and the floating cities."

"I've heard—" Torcred began, looking impressed. The girl smiled loftily.

"Those are tales that have lost their substances, fit for the young, the ignorant, and the uncivilized. Certainly the great ancients existed—they were an air-people like us, who ruled the world long ago, as we shall in time to come. But that they were immortal and are still alive, drifting somewhere in midocean out of sight of land—that's nonsense."

"Maybe so," Torcred grunted stolidly. In the cosmogony he knew, the ancients were mighty terrapin heroes of the world's youth, from whose stock all other races had degenerated; they still lived somewhere, and would return to make the terrapins supreme again . . . He said matter-of-factly, "If you want to know what I think—we are being watched, by something that is alive and powerful *here and now*."

LADNA started and looked nervously round. She had begun to respect the Terrapin's shrewd native intelligence. As they plodded on across the desert, she said no more, infected by his dark preoccupation.

But in Torcred's brain the question of the stranger's identity loomed less large than that of his own. What was he? Ex-warrior and hunter, ex-hero, ex-terrapin—

he could think of things he had been and was not.

I am a—

He had no word. Outcast, traitor, criminal? A newborn pride in him rebelled against the labels he would have accepted without question before his battle with the panzer. He had earned a name, but he had no name.

The west veiled its face in flame again, and darkness overtook them in the wilderness. Torcred dreamed that he stood naked in the middle of a vast circle of formidable machines that snarled and hooted, demanding his name and lineage; and he had no answer. In desperation he cried, "I am I!"—and a thousand motors roared, the armored mass rolled inward to crush him.

He woke staring into a dawn-lit sky where a black flight of buzzards droned northward thousands of feet overhead.

Ladna was awake too and looking up, the old tense fear-born hatred expressed in every line of her body.

"They're insolent," she murmured half to herself. "So close . . . This is already my people's land," she explained to Torcred, and her gaze led his toward the mountains, where gray and red and yellow cliffs and slopes stood out now from the blue haze of the canyons. "I don't know how those buzzards dare to fly so near."

"Why do you hate them so?" asked Torcred.

"They're evil. They want to rule the world."

"Well—" Torcred scowled, still out of sorts after his nightmare. "Don't you bird-folk have the same grand plans?"

"That's different!" she cried vehemently. "Don't dare to compare us to the buzzards! We're hunters, like the terrapins, but the buzzards kill and destroy for sport. The milk of their mothers is bitter with cruelty! Oh, if those things should win—" she made a swift gesture to ward off evil—"you'll learn what terror can be!"

A skeptical part of Torcred's mind reflected that that was one side's story. But he wanted to believe the girl when her blue eyes blazed so and her voice trembled with passion. Once he had wanted to hurt her and humble her. That had been long ago . . .

But there was a strained silence between them as they made ready to resume the march.

They had hardly gone fifty paces when they heard again the noise of engines aloft, nearer this time, and looking up saw a second trio of buzzards passing over. But one of these had left the others and was dropping steeply earthward, heading, it seemed, straight toward them.

Torcred stared stupidly at the great machine—it could not possibly mean to attack them in their utter insignificance. Ladna was less confident; she shrielled, "Down!" and Torcred dropped to all fours and flattened himself to the sand beside her, just as the buzzard leveled off and shot overhead so low that they could see the landing wheels folded like talons under it, could see a door open in its black belly. Something appeared through the aperture and vanished in the speed of its fall. The buzzard had laid an egg, and it hatched mere yards away with a flash and roar that left them blinded, deafened, smothered, feeling that the earth had heaved up to meet the falling sky and pinned them between.

Torcred sat up, swaying, his head a ringing void. He glimpsed Ladna's face, tears of rage furrowing the grime of sand on her cheeks as she glared after the receding and climbing buzzard.

AND not far away, among loose heaps of sand on the rim of the blast crater, he saw a strange thing. A massive cone of metal, with the spiral grooves and flanges of a screw, thrust slantingly from the ground; it was turning slowly, earth dropping from it, and as he stared it turned faster and moved forward and upward, drawing after it a glistening rounded back.

Dazedly Torcred walked toward the thing, and as he did so a port-cover lifted in the armored back and a man's head thrust out. He blinked at Torcred with a look of stunned confusion.

"What happened?" demanded the mole in a shaken voice. "I was coming up for a breath of air, then—*bang!*" He looked around wildly. "My garden! What have they done to my garden?"

The moles, Torcred knew, made gardens—sheets of cellotex impregnated, like the sun-screens of the trailers and like machines, with photosynthetic chemicals. Even the predators left them alone, for the most part, since the moles were a peaceful and harmless race. That, then, had been the bomb's target.

The mole peered at Torcred, seemed to come to himself. "What are you?" he gasped, and without waiting for an answer, ducked inside. The hatch-cover slammed, the great screw reversed and revolved furiously, and the burrowing machine slowly sank from sight under the sand.

"Now do you believe me—about *them?*" demanded Ladna's stifled voice.

Torcred nodded slowly, feeling sorry for the poor frightened mole, and rather surprised at himself for it, as he had been when he had spared the beaten crew of the panzer . . . Torcred the Terrapin was never like that. Mechanically his fingers caressed the half-healed mark on his forehead.

The girl's tongue seemed loosened by their near escape, and as they journeyed on, she talked, with a calm bitterness now, of the enemy. Torcred knew vaguely that, somewhere far to the north, was Buzzard Base, an immense fortress with subterranean dwellings and hangars where the black monsters bred and swarmed. Ladna enlightened him further. "Some of our spies"—the word meant nothing to Torcred—"got inside the place not long ago. They reported things stirring, the buzzards building airframes and engines at a furious rate, obviously planning a new move. Naturally, we increased our construction tempo to keep pace with them, but we've been puzzled; you see, there were rumors that the chief buzzards were worried about something else, besides the old dragging stalemate. But whatever it was, they were keeping it secret even from their own rank and file."

Torcred shook his head bewilderedly; he was lost in her world with its vastness and complexity of organization and politics and schemes for domination. With the openmindedness of confusion he had to admit that the civilization of the air was such as the free terrapins did not dream

of . . . And he felt an inward hurt as, in the girl's talk of her people and their life, he sensed the widening of the distance between them, which had almost dwindled away while they wandered and struggled to survive and nearly died together in the desert.

But the mountains were close now, and they made good time that day. They did not need to evade any of the prowling land machines, for the desert here was utterly empty, unmarked by wheels, under the threat of the desolate plateaus above and ahead, from which deadly flying things ranged far and wide.

A couple of times they glimpsed winged squadrons in the sky, and the girl's eyes shone, and the shadow on Torcred's face grew deeper.

AS evening came on, the mesas rose bare and sheer before them out of the sandy waste. They climbed laboriously over smooth rock and gravel slides; Ladna led the way upward, trying to sight landmarks that were meant to be seen from the air.

At last she gave a little cry of joy, and pointed up the dry streambed they were ascending. Torcred looked, and saw nothing but the rock-rimmed head of the canyon; but the girl had seen some sign that wholly escaped him. "We're practically there!"

Behind her back Torcred passed a hand across his eyes. "Well, then," he said with assumed casualness, "you'll be all right from here on."

She whirled and gave him a searching look. "What are you talking about?"

Torcred's jaw muscles twitched. "I'm wishing you a happy homecoming," he answered, "by way of saying goodbye."

"But you're coming with me! . . . Aren't you? . . . What else can you do?"

He shook his head somberly. "I'm too used to freedom, Ladna. I'll take my chances with the desert again."

"I told you my people will accept you, and your fate among them will be no worse than mine . . ." Her protest trailed off as she read the inflexible refusal in his impassive face.

"Earth and sky can't meet." He looked back down the canyon, toward where a

wedge of the barren plain, pink with reflected sunset, showed between the rock walls. Then the girl was in front of him again. Her eyes were very large, and her red lips spoke no more useless words of pleading.

Instead—her hands were on his shoulders, her arms slipped round his neck as her slim body swayed against him, her face blurred with nearness, tilted up . . .

Gravely, according to the terrapin custom, Torcred touched noses with her.

He felt her go tense, and she drew back. Her eyes glistened with a shock and disappointment he was at a loss to understand. She said in a choked voice, "Good-bye!" and turned and fled up the ravine.

Mechanically Torcred picked up the satchel with the remainder of her share of the food and water, which she had remembered to leave behind. His muscles tightened with a violent urge to run after her and bring her back by force.

But how could he hold her with him? She still had her place, however small, in the world of machines that had cast him out . . . Suddenly he hated them all without exception, all the iron monsters that ruled the world in whose sight flesh and blood were helpless, hopeless, as nothing.

He stumbled down the mountain, going into an exile lonelier than that stigmatized by the brand on his forehead. Yet withal, loneliness and hatred, he felt a curious inner peace. His brain was no longer a battlefield of hostile allegiances and longings. He still had no name for what he had become. But it didn't matter any more.

He reached the bottom of the last rock slide, and looked back; in the failing light he could just make out the mesa rim, above which must lie the aeros' eyrie. Nothing moved up there. She would be at home now, among her own kind.

VIII

WHEN HE TURNED AWAY, HE saw the stranger standing not far off, beneath a great stone promontory that thrust out into the sea of sand, his back to a deep black cleft in the rock. Torcred could see his face clearly this time, and this time it was unsmiling, the brows

drawn together and lips compressed in an expression of anxiety. The stranger beckoned with a jerky urgency, half-turned, and pointed toward the crevice of the cliff.

Torcred took a step toward him, his anger boiling up dangerously, blood drumming in his ears. "What are you?" he shouted. "What do you want? You've dogged my steps, watched me, and applauded my downfall. Now what—"

The stranger's eyes shifted, and he moved his head as if listening to a voice that Torcred did not hear. His eyes widened with alarm, and he vanished like a blown-out flame.

Torcred blinked baffledly. The hand on the hilt of his knife relaxed, but the roaring in his ears grew louder. Almost it might be real . . .

He threw back his head and looked up. Far above, individually almost indistinguishable in the pale twilight sky but making it alive with their massed formations, V after V of black flying shapes were moving. The air throbbed with the vibrant roar of many engines.

The leading squadrons were already over the mountain when the first dart of flame leaped from it and climbed with a whistling rush to meet them. Others followed, the clatter of their guns mingling with the multiple crescendo shriek of the first sticks of falling bombs.

Torcred crouched involuntarily, bracing himself for the concussions that must shake earth and air . . . But only dull thudding sounds rolled down from the mesa, as if the rain of projectiles fell without exploding.

Over the mountain two buzzards dropped out of formation and wobbled earthward, trailing smoke down the sky, and a third burst into bright flame and disintegrated in a meteoric shower. New formations still came droning out of the north—the buzzards were attacking in force. Their bombs kept landing with sullen thumps, almost inaudible under the roar of motors, the sputter of guns and the flat reports of aerial cannon.

But to Torcred, hugging the lee of a great boulder and trying with straining eyes to pierce the darkness that increasingly shrouded the mesa, those dull incessant

impacts became an ominous sound. Ladna had gone up there—she had had plenty of time to reach safety in the buried heart of the eyrie, which even the mightiest explosives could scarcely touch—but without knowing why, Torcred edged out of his shelter and began once more, creeping from rock to rock, to clamber up the steep ravine that the two of them had ascended together.

He had not progressed far—in the dark the uncertain footing was dangerous—when the breeze, sighing down the canyon with cool mountain-top air for the hot plain, brought confirmation of his fear with it.

A whiff of strange odor that stung in his nostrils and tickled his windpipe harshly. Then his eyes began to smart as it grew rapidly stronger; the gas the buzzards had used to blanket the mesa was a dense one, designed to seek out the aero people in the depths of their underground fortress.

Torcred halted, blinking, struggling with the growing need to cough. He recognized the odor after a moment—the same poison that the machines called skunks used against their enemies. He knew that enough of it was deadly. And a cold hand of terror clutched at his heart.

HE flung caution from him and started to scramble recklessly, planlessly upward. Denser clouds of gas met him, and, half-blinded, he stumbled against sharp rocks and almost fell when fits of coughing shook him. His chest became a rasping furnace, and each deep panting breath was a flame. Bitterly he knew that his will could not drive him much longer into that torment . . .

In the air something flew burning, and the light of its destruction fell bright as day into the canyon and threw shifting shadows. Torcred's tear-filled eyes blurred the glare, but he glimpsed a small dark-clad figure huddled on the rocks not ten feet from him, across a black crevice that might be five or fifty feet deep.

He crouched and sprang; weakened knees betrayed him, he landed clawing on the rounded lip of the chasm and barely managed to pull himself up to the girl's

side. But new strength steeled him as he gathered his feet under him and dragged both her and himself erect.

Ladna was alive and conscious; she leaned against him, coughing weakly.

"I was coming back," she gasped in his ear. "I'd have been up there . . . but I was coming back . . . to you . . ."

Torcred hardly understood her. "Come on!" he croaked. "Down!"

The way seemed immeasurably longer than the way up had been. It was really a little longer—the gas was settling fast—until, staggering, each half-supporting the other, they reached a level where the air was no longer choking poison. Ladna grew able to stand alone; swaying a little, she followed Torcred down the treacherous slides in the canyon's mouth.

On the soft wind-piled sand below the great rifted rock, where Torcred had last seen the visionary stranger, they sank down to rest by common consent. Torcred listened anxiously to the girl's hoarse breathing.

He moistened his lips and asked, "How do you feel?"

Ladna stirred and sat up with an effort that set her coughing again. "I'll be all right . . . We'll go back into the desert, and live there somehow, as long—as long as we live."

"That's right," said Torcred. In the dark she couldn't see how his face grew grim at the thought of how short their life together was likely to be.

He raised his head, sniffing the air. A thin sharp taint, reminiscent of stifling agony, told him they must be up and moving soon. The gas was diffusing but still dangerous; up yonder on the plateau, where it had been concentrated, it must have left nothing save desolation and death . . .

Only then did he become aware, with a start of amazement, of the great silence that enfolded mountain, sky, and desert.

The air, at least, which had snarled with motors not twenty minutes earlier, should still have echoed to the sound of battle. But the sky was empty.

No, not empty—abruptly landing lights cut a brilliant swathe far out on the desert. The buzzard pilot saw he had misjudged

his altitude and tried to pull up, the huge ship stalled and its lights went out as it plowed into the ground. Before the sound of its crash reached the mountain's foot, a pillar of fire was mounting above the dunes, and they saw that the air was full of machines, attackers and defenders alike in one confused flitting swarm, wheeling, dipping and always drifting downward, unpowered.

Ladna gasped, "What's happened? The buzzards—"

"I don't know. Maybe your people—"

"They're not my people any more," she interrupted swiftly. "Whatever you are, I am too . . . And anyway, all the engines are dead."

TORCRED got up stiffly. On the desert between them and the fire, an aero glided down, bounced and rolled to a shaky landing. Its pilot dropped to the ground and stood staring at his useless machine; he did not even look up as a buzzard passed low over him with a rush of wings, touched ground and slewed round a short way off with a broken landing gear. Small figures spilled out of it too, their movements expressing the same dazed lack of understanding. The enemies paid each other no heed.

The smell of gas was stronger. The desert would be littered with aircraft, but they shouldn't have much trouble slipping through . . . Still Torcred frowned, hesitating. He turned with sudden resolution to the girl.

"Wait here. There's something I have to find out; but it won't take long."

"No!" Ladna struggled to her feet. "I'll go with you."

Torcred started to protest, then changed his mind. He turned silently toward the cliff whose blank stone face was lit redly by the dying fire, its great fissure a dark gulf of mystery.

Inside the cleft it was pitchblack, but the footing was smooth, packed sand. Torcred felt his way between rock walls. At first he heard only the scufflings the girl made, groping behind him, and then he was conscious of a faint all-pervading hum. Something was humming deep in the rock, and Torcred felt sure now that

he was going to find the meaning of the visions and of the battle's uncanny end.

He was hardly surprised when white light shone in the fissure ahead and a man appeared, black against it. The figure's outline was familiar. The stranger spoke—his first word in a strange tongue, but the rest intelligible enough though oddly pronounced.

"Ahoy, there! We'd almost given you up."

Torcred advanced warily. The stranger did not flicker nor vanish. A door was open, and the white light poured out from a chamber that must have been a natural hollow, laboriously enlarged in the stone. Torcred's hand shot out and gripped the man's arm above the elbow; the stranger started, then relaxed, and Torcred caught a flash of the grin he had seen before.

"I'm real," said the stranger. "I wasn't the other times we've met—but that's one of the things Captain Relez will explain to you. Now come inside, before the air out here gets any thicker."

Cautiously Torcred edged into the brightly-lit room, keeping in front of Ladna. He saw in the cramped space a glittering confusion of unfamiliar devices—it was the flimsiness of most of the apparatus that was most surprising; the terrapins and other races built mostly machinery designed to withstand heavy mechanical forces, but a blow of the hand would shatter most of those things of wire and glass tubes. A young man, hunched over a complex control panel beside a glass screen on which a darkly indistinct image floated, glanced up with narrowed eyes, and an older one with a small pointed beard met Torcred's suspicious gaze benignly, over a small table on which a map was spread, studded with colored pins.

Then Torcred heard the door click, and whirled, hand on his knife.

"It's not locked," the bearded man said calmly. "You can leave if you like—but we've gone to a good deal of trouble to persuade you here for a talk."

TORCRED faced him again, still tensely ready. The setup here didn't look dangerous, only incomprehensible. But he sensed power in this little room; the

deep potent hum he had heard in the fissure was at home here, though he could not locate its source.

"My name is Relez." The bearded man rose from behind his table, "Dunu, you can take care of the chart."

"Aye, aye, sir," said the young man they had seen as a phantom in the desert, and Torcred bristled again at the alien jargon. But Relez' casual manner was reassuring.

He gestured at a shelf cut into the stone. "Have a seat." Torcred obeyed mechanically, and Ladna huddled beside him. Torcred stared fascinated at the screen. A scene had resolved itself there—one of incredible, nostalgic familiarity. It was the twice-ringed camp of the terrapins, unmistakable to Torcred though he saw it now from a strange angle, from above. All the machines were in place, as was normal after nightfall. Torcred half started to his feet.

Then he saw what was not normal for that or any hour in a terrapin camp. A confusion of bobbing lights among the cars; the shop area in the midst was almost deserted, but against the reddening fires of the forges tiny black figures scurried to and fro like distracted ants. He could almost hear the cries of alarm and exasperation over the discovery that not a functioning engine was left in the whole troop.

Torcred turned and caught Relez smiling in his beard.

"You did that!"

Relez nodded. "Unfortunately, we didn't get the antiionization field into operation in time to prevent the buzzards' gas attack. But there won't be any more fighting tonight, unless they do it with knives. It's a bit of luck that none of these people seem to have any notion of portable firearms. No more mechanized warfare, though, as long as that unit is working." He gestured at a thing of massive coils and bus bars and fragile glowing tubes, from which, Torcred perceived now, the humming came.

Ladna's blue eyes were wide. "That little device—has stopped all the machines?"

"It broadcasts a wave form that affects

the molecules of air, of all gases, inhibiting their ionization. So no spark can jump, and motors are stopped when their electric ignition fails. The only machines that can move now, inside its range, are the moles, with their battery-driven electric motors for underground travel—which is lucky for them, or they'd be trapped under the earth.

"Everything else—terrapins, trailers, aeros, buzzards, and all the rest—are paralyzed. Our field's range blankets five hundred thousand square miles. Beyond that area, others are responsible for administering the same treatment; it already began a month ago on the coast—"

"What are you?" Torcred burst out. "What do you want?"

"We three—Dunu, Rhenu, and I—are the Continental Demilitarization Commission for this area. As to what we are trying to do, that will take some explaining—"

"I meant," Torcred scowled, dissatisfied, "what is your race?"

Relez regarded him strangely. "The same as yours. The race of man."

IX

THEY CAME OF PEOPLES which had no history, only legend and tradition. And they learned—

That there was such a thing as history, recorded in books; Relez showed them such a book, which they could not read, because neither of them could understand more than the code markings on mechanical parts.

That the storied ancients, whose powers were marvelous and whose end was terrible, had really existed and had left their record in writing.

How after the great wars that had almost seared his life from the Earth's surface, when man's weapons—and his medical science—had wiped out every creature save the indestructible destroyer himself, the machine races had risen from the shreds of technical knowledge hoarded by the scattered groups of survivors and crystallized by their descendants in the rigid mold of tradition. And how that last war had never ended, but had passed into

the nature of things in the unending war of the predatory machines against the feeders on sunlight, and of the races of land and air and sea for mastery of their habitats.

"But no matter who wins, no man is master; the machine is the ruler, and man is its slave. It is against that we have begun to fight, now, after all the long dark ages . . ."

For one place on all the harried Earth had provided the relative security and permanence needed to keep alive a spark of the ancients' culture. That was aboard the great ships at sea, that had been built and armed to resist every hellish technique of destruction known to the dead age of their building, and were wholly invulnerable to today's weapons. Those were floating cities in truth, with atomic power plants, machine shops, dwellings, hospitals, storehouses, recreation space, libraries—and in the later times, when their first purpose as warships had been almost forgotten, classrooms and laboratories where the knowledge of the past was dredged up from the memories of men and from the books, and even added to in some ways.

"We have built up the nucleus of a new civilization on the sea," said Relez solemnly. "Now the time has come for it to take root on the dry land. But first the continents must be pacified. The world must be taken from the warring machines and given back to man.

"We possess some of the old ones' weapons, and we could try to use them to enforce our will, as they did. And I think our end would be like theirs. But we have invested some new devices to serve the cause of peace. The anti-ionization field is chief among those. I myself had some share in developing it—my title of 'captain' means leader of a group of scientists, not master of a ship."

"Is there no defense against the field?" asked Torcred shrewdly.

RELEZ eyed him thoughtfully. "There are ways of avoiding the effect," he admitted, "but they are not likely to occur to these custom-bound people. And once they are liberated from the tyranny of the machine—"

"Your method of liberation," said Torcred, "is to reduce everyone to an equal helplessness, and let them fight it out among themselves?"

"You might put it that way. I'm afraid there will be some bloodshed. The predatory peoples, naturally, will have the hardest time at first. But— Suppose you tell me what you think will happen, for example, when the terrapins come in contact, under the new conditions, with their old enemies and prey, the trailer people."

"Why—at first they will be afraid to venture out of the camp. Then, when the food supply runs low, they will begin to think of attacking the stalled trailer herd on foot. A quick raid, by determined men with knives and clubs, might work once or twice, but not after that, because the trailer people are much more numerous, and, once recovered from the first confusion and organized, they could defend themselves . . ."

"But if you were chief of the terrapins, what would you do?"

Torcred thought hard, intrigued in spite of himself. "I think—I would try to get some of the sun-machines the trailers use. In order to have an independent supply of food and power, you understand. That lightning raid, perhaps—but it would be hard to dismantle the screens and escape with them. No, I think I would try to bargain with the trailers. They have no radar scanners; if their suspicions could be allayed, they'd be willing to trade a few of their sun-screens for some terrapin sighting devices."

"Not realizing that those have lost their value, now that all aircraft are grounded," said Relez with a smile. "It might work. And overcoming the suspicions may prove easier than you think, when men begin to meet each other under the open sky, and realize that their hates never belonged to them, but to the machines they served . . ."

"I don't know about the buzzards," murmured Ladna dubiously.

Relez disregarded that. "What we need now is helpers. The anti-ionization field is the catalyst of peace, but if it is to work quickly, the confused peoples must have guidance.

"We've done a little advance mission-

ary work among the more civilized and approachable tribes, both in the flesh, and by teleprojection, as Dunu appeared to you in the wilderness. The televueer, incidentally, is another of our new developments; the old machines of that type used both a transmitter and receiver, but this one works on the principle you can see once in a while in nature, when atmospheric refraction is just right to reassemble the light from a distant object and project its picture in the air. Only very recently we perfected the reverse application of the effect, so that under good conditions we can project a three-dimensional image—mirage—over large distances.

"But those methods are inadequate for working directly on the minds of the peoples. Few as we are, we can't appear openly as authors of the change; for the time being, let them think it a natural phenomenon. However," his eyes met Torcred's and held them in a challenging gaze, "very much could be done to smooth a people's way toward civilization by an agent who belongs by birth to it . . ."

"I was a terrapin once," said Torcred steadily. "Now I am a man of the race of man. And in the eyes of the terrapins I am an outcast, accursed."

"I know. But your very return, when they think you dead, may help the breakdown of the old habits and customs . . . I don't say it will be easy. But I believe the desert has sharpened your wits."

TORCRED considered. The mark on his forehead burned, but he remembered how there had been compassion in Vazled's face even as he wielded the knife, and that his worst enemy was discredibly dead in the desert. "Perhaps," he muttered.

"If you go back," said Ladna quietly, "I go too."

Relez stroked his beard. "That might make trouble."

The girl turned on him, electric fire in her look. "None of your business!"

Relez smiled. "On the other hand, maybe it will be for the best—a step forward in contact between the peoples."

Torcred felt a new strength and confidence born of Ladna's loyalty. He said,

"Your scheme is good, if it will work. I will—we will help you make it work."

The older man's face lit. "Good!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "You already have some sound ideas. I suggest—"

"Captain!" broke in a low, taut voice. "What do you make of this?"

Relez wheeled. The young technician who had been operating the controls of the televiewer was pointing at the screen in horror.

The scene was a sweep of desert, silvered by the risen moon. There were indistinct dark shapes that might be a tribe of dragons, stalled, of course. But around and among them red flashes leaped and black towers of smoke sprang up to drift down the quiet night wind.

It was a scene of death and destruction whose silence made it unreal. But as the five people in the rock chamber held their breath, they heard and felt, telegraphed from far away through the ground, the dull heavy concussions of exploding bombs.

"Scan the sky, Rhenu," gulped the captain.

The view shifted as Rhenu's trembling fingers made adjustments, and they glimpsed a black squadron drifting across the moonlit sky. Cruising with a leisurely consciousness of invulnerability, in the knowledge that the victims were helpless to maneuver, sitting ducks to be blasted at will.

"Keep on scanning!" snapped Relez, but his face was ashen as he saw his dreams crumbling.

Dunu was incredulously checking the anti-ionization generator. "There's nothing wrong here," he reported. But the screen showed scene after scene of a carnival of destruction. The night sky was full of buzzards, flying low, playing their searchlights on the desert and raining gas and explosives on everything that lived. It was the buzzards' moment to strike for dominance and they were making the most of it.

Dunu said frozenly, "They must have been warned by their kin on the coast, and have managed to develop an engine with a hotspot ignition system."

Relez muttered, looking suddenly old and weary, "It's too bad. The people with

the highest technical ingenuity—but their motivation seems to be insane hate of everything unlike them."

"I told you so," Ladna said bitterly.

Torcred had no ears for philosophy; he had seen enough of the murder going on out there. He bounded to his feet and his knife flashed in his hand.

"One side!" he snarled at the recoiling Duru. "I'm going to smash that machine and give the rest of us a chance!"

BUT Relez had stepped between him and the generator. The color returned to his bearded features as he faced the threatening blade.

"Wait!" he cried. "Don't wreck all your chances for peace—"

"I'll give you peace," said Torcred, "if you don't get out of the way."

Ladna was behind him, he knew, knife drawn, holding the thunderstruck assistants at bay.

Relez did not move. "I told you we possess some of the ancients' weapons. The decision to use them belongs properly to the High Command of the Fleet—but in this case I will take it on myself."

"You have such weapons here?"

"Yes. A bomb, which in case we were discovered here could have exploded to wipe out this place and protect our secrets. You and the girl can take one of the grounded aeros outside and carry the bomb over Buzzard Base. I'll switch off the anti-ionization field for half an hour, long enough for you to go on a return . . ."

"One bomb?" exclaimed Ladna scornfully. "They have thousands!"

"No more will be needed."

Torcred's black gaze searched Relez' face for long moments. He read utter sincerity there, and lowered the knife.

X

THE AERO ROARED ACROSS A short stretch of sand and was airborne. It swerved, evading a buzzard squadron that was droning over, and climbed swiftly into the north.

Torcred huddled in the cramped space behind the pilot's seat, over the little dull metal box that Relez claimed was a bomb.

He glimpsed Ladna's face, over the dimly glowing controls; it was as if transfigured. She was tasting the joy she had thought lost to her forever, the glory of flight through the high thin air at a thousand miles an hour.

"This isn't like crawling, is it?" she asked lightly. "Four or five minutes now, and we'll be there."

Torcred braced himself more firmly. "Give me thirty seconds warning."

Presently the girl cut off the power. The machine slowed and began to swerve and buck a little as its speed approached that of sound. "Thirty seconds."

Relez had told him how to arm the bomb. Torcred pushed the levers he had indicated, and looked doubtfully at the harmless-looking gray box. "We're over it," said Ladna. "The place is lit up; they're not expecting anything else in the air. I can see buzzards taking off . . ."

Torcred, of course, could see nothing. He shoved open the emergency escape door in the floor and tipped the lead box out into the shrieking rush of air.

The engine's sighing roar began again. He slammed the door shut and squirmed forward, into the seat beside Ladna. The little ship ran away, faster than sound or an air shock wave could follow . . .

But they saw the glare that turned desert and mountains and sky ahead white with a reflected radiance brighter than the noonday sun. For moments it lasted, then the light died and the night was dead black to their dazzled eyes.

"The ancients' weapons were pretty potent," said Torcred, and the girl shivered.

She made a wide circle and flew back, but they could see nothing in the valley where Buzzard Base had been. Only an immense cloud of darkness still faintly luminous at its heart, roiling slowly upward. The air was turbulent. Ladna gave the cloud a wide berth, for Relez had warned them of that.

The girl looked questioningly at Torcred. He said, "A line due south from the Salt Sea should find us the terrapins' camp."

Obediently Ladna made a few degrees' turn to the west. "You still believe—"

"That Relez was right? I don't know. But I know this—whether the men of the floating cities have their way of the world or not, they've started a change that must lead to more change, a new civilization . . . And I still want to help the terrapins make a place in it—first of all by teaching them that they are men."

THE great salt lake unrolled in the moonlight and slipped away beneath the ship. They raced on over the southern reaches of the valley where they had wandered three strange days. Then in midflight the motor choked and died. The anti-ionization field had closed down again.

"Relez is in a hurry for his peace," remarked Torcred, and they laughed a little hysterically. The ship lost altitude and the shadowy desert came up to meet them, but not before they saw, a couple of miles away, a spot of light that Torcred's keen eyes identified as the camp of the terrapins. He breathed a sigh of relief at finding it undamaged by the buzzard raids.

"You can start educating them in the morning," said Ladna. "Isn't the moon lovely tonight?"

"Eh?" Torcred was jarred by the disconnectedness of her remarks. "Why wait till morning?"

She started to answer, then exclaimed and wrenched at the controls. The aero wobbled on one wing as the top of a dune slid by scant feet below; then it plowed through the next crest and pancaked into the valley beyond.

The two scrambled, shaken up but undamaged, out of the battered craft, and Torcred caught the disheveled girl in his arms.

"You're a hopelessly bad bird," he growled in mock rage. "Two ships you've smashed up inside a week!"

And he would have touched noses with her, but Ladna evaded the gesture adroitly.

"Don't be a terrapin!" she chided. "You've got to learn civilized ways . . . like this . . ."

He learned.



"Why'd you do that?" cried Rhiannon.

TUBEMONKEY

By JEROME BIXBY

Radiations had shorted his brilliant pilot's brain, left him an aimless, childish hulk. Yet Rhiannon had his moments—when he needed them.

ECHOED BY THE SLOPING, sun-drenched concrete walls, booming above the high, bony clatter of monorail cranes, shaming the entire fuming, metallic hubbub of Boat Bed 52, the sound might have been the cavernous indignation of some giant beast being dragged zoo-ward from a Bio-Institute boat. It was, however, a voice, singing:

*Oh-h-h, the boats come in
An' the boats go out
An' we clean 'em an' screen 'em
an' preen 'em.*

*We fix their fins
An' we polish their snouts
With a five second breather
between 'em.*

*I-i-if she comes in smash
From a steerocket lash
Do we wait 'til they've counted
the dead?*

*Oh never, tut tut—
We just plate up her butt
An' fix up the rest in the— the—*

Mountainous Rhiannon couldn't remember the last word. The clouded crystal, that was Rhiannon. He killed his buffing-ray and aimed a bellow that not only shivered the eardrums of its target but woke up Sergeant Atoms a hundred feet below, bringing him to his feet with an adoring bark.

"Hey, Stevie, what'sa last word?"

Steve Podalski swung his legs into view

and slid carelessly down the dull metal roundness of tube fourteen, like a boy on a barrel. His magnetic boots thunked onto tube thirteen and took hold. He gave Rhiannon a look compounded of acid and pity. "Go to hell with your noise."

Off at the other end of Bed 52 a gong sounded its invitation to cease work and relax for a while. The twelve Navy spaceboats in 52, lined hip to hip like reclining madames on their slanting cradles, seemed suddenly to begin to shed their skins as a solid parasitica of out-ship workers melted in streams toward the upthrust frameworks of the lifts.

"I comin gout." A small cabbagelike Asteroidal came out of the smudgy darkness of the tube, a scraping-ray in each flat tentacle. "I knockin goff." Without a break in its fluid motion it climbed onto Rhiannon's arm and couched itself in the angle of his elbow.

"Yeah, me too. Coming, Stevie?"

Podalski shook his head.

He stood and watched Rhiannon and Tweety—Tieu-tuiey was its given name, but to pronounce it correctly always sounded a little gay—make their way toward the lift. He shook his head again. Once a pilot, he thought, not necessarily always a pilot. Space did rotten things to men who got careless with their radiation screens. It blotted their minds, tossed up fences around memory and intelligence.

A most brilliant crystal—that's what Rhiannon had once been.

SIXTY feet away and four stories above the concrete floor of Bed 52, a man stood by the curving window of Karrin's office and watched Rhiannon descend in the lift. He was a small, padded man with the sly look of the lower Mars suburbs about him.

"Tubemonkey," he said, curling his lips over the word.

Karrin raised his sober, business-man's eyes from their inspection of the briefcase on the desk before him. "He'll do perfectly, Lin. He's just idiot enough to get us there and back and then forget all about it. He got a dose of cosmos—sometimes he can't even remember his own name."

"Yes?" Lin Janus' cold gaze followed

Rhiannon as the big man went through the distant playground gate. Rhiannon was carrying Tweety on his shoulder and bouncing every other step into the air, and Tweety had wrapped indignant tentacles around his steed's head. A mud-colored puppy went scooting after them, yanked by jealousy from the quilted lay his master had prepared for him beneath Cradle Nine.

"Can he still handle a boat?"

"Not for combat." Karrin leaned far back in his chair and locked his hands behind his head with a dignity that made the awkward position seem very right. "He can still hit space, though."

Janus turned away from the window.

"You'd better make certain that he forgets," he said.

Karrin shrugged; another killing wouldn't matter much. "Why do we need a pilot in the first place?"

"You took me out last time," Janus said flatly, "and I damned near died of fright." He tapped the briefcase. "You're sure this is the right stuff? I can't tell from looking, you know—hyper-atomics are out of my line."

Karrin smiled slightly and brought his body forward in the chair. "You're getting what you're paying me for." He took his time about lighting a cigarette and then laid it on the edge of the desk as he stood up. He took a leather folder from the briefcase, opened it to reveal a dozen closely printed and diagrammed sheets.

"These," he said, "are Llarn's defenses. Take my word for it."

Unlike most wars, this one had started formally and in good military taste. From their headquarters on Llarn's moon the Rebels had made their request for political autonomy, and denial had come promptly, through Llarn's Council, from the far off Earth Federation. The Rebels had announced their intent to revolt in force and the first engagement had occurred that very day—a space battle, fought competently by both sides, and a draw. Llarn, Earth's first extra-Solar pioneer world, threw up hyper-atomic shields—Llarn's moon did likewise—and the matter rested there in a checkmate of technological perfection.

Subsequent space battles had been

fought, but these mattered very little. It had boiled down to a secret service war; a deadlock to be broken by the first side skillful enough to spy out the plans of the enemy's defense set-up. Sabotage could then finish the job.

THE attendant looked at Rhiannon without enthusiasm. He gave the big man a time ticket and turned and went through an arched doorway. He had just pulled a fresh punching bag from the dwindling supply when a *wham* sound ran across the air of the playground outside.

Surrounded by pained chuckles, Rhiannon looked unhappily at the dangling plastic ruin and allowed himself to be shoved aside by the bitter attendant. Then, when the damage was repaired, he drew back his huge right arm again. The attendant grabbed it.

"Hold on, Rhiannon, there's a rocket game over here, fella. Come on and I'll show it to you!" He pulled the reluctant giant over to a facsimile control board set against the wall; watched for, and saw, the huge smile break out. Every day was a new life for Rhiannon, and the presence of this mock control board—installed to keep him out of trouble—came always as a wonderful surprise.

"Sit down, Rhiannon. Tubes set?"

A tense nod.

"Gravity o. k.? Green light from Central? *Blast off!*"

Rhiannon zoomed his boat into outer space and began to chase a comet. It got away from him. After a while he thought it would be nice if he could blast the whole Rebel navy out of the void—and they appeared, tier upon tier of them, in gleaming battle shields.

"Sergeant Atoms!" he rumbled. "Make ready to fire."

Atoms rose up on his hind legs, compelled and controlled by the strange and inexplicable telepathic aftermath of Rhiannon's misfortune. The former pilot's "cosmic braincut"—and the "braincuts" of the other few similar radiation cases—had resulted in this sour blessing: had stepped up their mental broadcasting apparatus, and left them very little to broadcast. Humans could often pick up

random thoughts from these men, while animals reacted easily to their will.

Thus it was that "Sergeant" Atoms placed his paws on the dummy firing button; a temporarily selfless extension of Rhiannon's physical and psychical form.

Together, they wiped out the Rebel fleet in a matter of seconds.

Rhiannon was exploring Polaris when a hand fell lightly upon his shoulder. He whirled up and around snarling. A Rebel spy on his boat: he'd kill the son—

Karrin ducked, his face seeming to sag pallid from the front of his skull. "Whoa, now, Rhiannon, it's Karrin—it's Karrin!"

"Rebel spy!" Rhiannon had Karrin dangling off the floor at the end of his arm. He drew back his other fist—all the way to Polaris—for the blow that would end the war. Then reality registered behind those glazed, distant-seeing pupils.

"Mr. Karrin! I'm sorry sir." He set his employer's sandals back on the floor and began to shuffle uncomfortably.

Karrin looked about him, his fury artfully concealed beneath a rigid, we-must-be-patient smirk. The other workers in the ground, some of them poised in mid-step after having started to the rescue, were looking embarrassed and quickly turned to resume their games. The sounds of bowling and fencing and tennis and swimming drove away the silence, and the odd patois of multi-specied mechanics and technicians swelled up like jungle chatter.

Karrin put his hand on Rhiannon's sleeve and walked the big man into the vast quiet of Bed 52. Atoms came after them, wagging almost everything but his head which arrowed straight and true after the giant figure.

When he was paid no attention, however, he sulked over to his box and lay down and was immediately asleep. "Sergeant" Atoms would have been a poor choice to stand guard duty—he had been known to sleep the clock around, silent and unmoving. Great boats had been lifted from the cradles above him and others put into their place, and Atoms had dreamed on and on. And on.

Rhiannon started to apologize again.

"That's perfectly all right, soldier," Karrin said smoothly. "Commendable at-

titude!" He led the way past the cradles toward the rear of the Bed. "You want to help win the war, don't you?"

"Yes, yes," Rhiannon groaned.

Karrin beamed his approval. "Well, now, you may be able to do just that, my boy! How would you like to be—"

"I was exploring Polaris, sir." Rhiannon's tones were suddenly vacant. "The people there got three hea—" and the latter part of the word remained unspoken, forgotten.

Karrin's smile wavered. They had halted by a freight entrance opening onto the green-carpeted rear grounds. He drew the big man closer to him and snapped his words like a whip.

"Now *listen*, Rhiannon! How would you like to, hit space again—to get your silver Sun back—to be reinstated as a commander!"

That tore through Rhiannon's fog and he reacted. He straightened his seventy nine inches into the position of attention. "I'd like nothing better, sir," he said.

Karrin made a great show of inspecting their immediate surroundings for eavesdroppers.

He said: "This is a very important, a top secret mission. We—the Council—believe that you are the only man who can fly it. We selected you from among thousands, Rhiannon!"

Rhiannon stood ever more stiffly, his face incandescent.

"Yes sir. I didn't know you were a Council Member, sir."

"Very few people do," Karrin replied dryly. "Now, soldier, a special boat is being tuned up at my private field. Do you know where that is?"

"Outside in back, sir. I've worked on your boats."

Karrin nodded. "Then go there immediately and wait. Talk to no one. I have to confer with President Naro before—"

"President Naro, sir!"

Karrin saluted theatrically and Rhiannon responded with eyes afire. The big man executed a neat about-face and marched one two through the door. And looking after the broad back, Karrin speculated where to place the death shot when the time came.

THE nebula hung to starboard, seeming almost at arm's length from the ports; a silver pinwheel; a thirty thousand light year toy. Rhiannon jockeyed the boat closer and closer to the Rebel craft, his big hands skipping over the board with consummate, unthinking skill. He shot out the hand-line and it snaked to the airlock of the other boat.

Janus, holding the briefcase flat against his belly, stepped into the lower portion of the single spacesuit and ducked under and up into the top portion that hung from its rack. The muffled clicks as he turned the sealing handles were the only sound in the cabin. Then his voice came metallic from the speaker. "We'll contact you, Karrin, if we need you again—although I think this trip should be the last one." He inflated the suit and stamped several times, testing the suit's perfection by the ringing in his ears.

Karrin's reply was purposefully vague, with an eye to Rhiannon. "There should be use for the Security Chief of Federation Spacelines even after the war is over, Janus. A—ah—" "Rebel" underground will likely start up—and as you've already seen, a man with a briefcase will hardly doubt the purity of my kitchens or suspect one of my cabin-boys of unwanted partisanship. I have some very cooperative men working for me."

Putting a boot on the hatch-ladder, Janus showed a sardonic grin through his faceplate. "Every man's purse is a traitor—"

Karrin sliced off the words with a quick gesture and shot a look at Rhiannon. The tubemonkey was staring through the front port at the stars, his face a caricature of bliss.

Janus shrugged, saying: "I thought you said he was *nicht*—" and swung himself clumsily up the ladder. "Besides," he added, "weren't you going to *convince* him of the necessity for silence?" He disappeared into the airlock. There was an airy *phoot* sound as he let himself into the void.

Karrin walked over to the front port and watched for Janus to become visible on the near length of the line. Watched, too, Rhiannon's reflection in the glass. The big man was gaping at the nebula and twitching the thick muscles of his neck in

ecstasy. Karrin felt an urge to snicker.

"Good to get back, eh?" he asked.

Rhiannon pointed. "There's your friend, sir."

Janus was bobbing, hand over hand, toward the unmarked Rebel boat. His faceplate gleamed once as it caught the fire of the nebula.

Then, before Karrin's paling face, the silver cigar that was the other boat suddenly threw off into space a thin leafing of curved misshaping plates. It grew whiskers that were ray-guns and the Nova sign of the Patrol blinked into being on its nose. The transformation took just three seconds, and on the tick of the fourth there was a honk from Karrin's telaudio to announce that the revealed law-boat desired contact.

Hissing between his clamped teeth Karrin leaned over Rhiannon's wide shoulder and speared a finger at the control board. The Patrolmen had made the mistake of judging his boat at its space-yacht face value, but it was far more than that.

The "yacht's" concealed atomiccannons blasted the other craft into radioactive dust. The frantically gesticulating figure of Janus was swallowed by the glare, and when space darkened again there was only the fused cable end, chewed off short near Karrin's porthole.

"Ge-ez!" cried Rhiannon. "Why'd you do that?"

"Didn't you see? Karrin snapped. "It was a Rebel boat! Janus must have been a spy!"

"But there was a Patrol Nova on—"

"Rhiannon—you've done a magnificent job!" Karrin clapped a hand on the giant's arm and tightened it emotionally. He slipped the safety on his pocketed atom pistol with the other hand. "That wasn't a Nova—that was the Rebel Tetra!"

Rhiannon looked up at him, his forehead plowed over with thought; then gradually a wide grin spread his lips. "We done it, didn't we?"

"We sure did."

Karrin's face was flattened at the cheeks. How the Patrol had known of this meeting he would never know, short of torturing each of his "cooperative men."

Janus was gone. The briefcase was gone. The real Rebel boat was probably bright drifting dust somewhere between here and Llarn's moon. Karrin shivered.

Would the Patrol have his office covered? Had they known *whom* they were trapping? Or had the tip-off not mentioned names?

"One way to find out."

Rhiannon looked up vaguely. "What, sir?"

"Get us back to Llarn, Rhiannon. I've got to report this to the President."

The swirling salt of the nebula moved out of the port and vanished as the big man tailed the boat around and side-stepped it into hyperspace. Karrin stood with wet hands clasped at his back. My papers. My money. I'll get them and make a run for Rebel H. Q. Surely the tip had not implicated him or he would never have gotten off Llarn in the first place. The Patrol would have seen to that: they knew that so many things could go wrong out in space.

Such as, he thought with grim satisfaction, what *had* gone wrong.

THE Government Spaceport was emptied and darkened by the evening. Steve Podalski and his brethren had gone to their homes, Tweety had gone sailing up into the stratosphere to sleep, and the only living creature was Sergeant Atoms who lay twitching his paws in a dream-chase.

From the floor of Bed 52 Rhiannon watched Karrin labor up the motionless 'scalator, saw the lights flicker on, saw his employer move about shoving things into a carrycase.

Rhiannon's affliction may be said to have been "stroboscopic" in character. That is, his brain functioned with an irregular alternation of clarity and fuddle. At this moment the lights were on in that great skull and his brain cells were skittering about, playing with a Thought.

It had been a Patrol boat. He had seen the Nova. It *had* been a Patrol boat. He'd *seen* that Nova.

He shifted uneasily in his wrappings of tubemonkey suit and reflections. He looked up again at Karrin's office. The man had moved back from the window;

only his head was visible, seeming to roll like Tweety back and forth on the broad sill as he crossed from safe to desk, desk to safe. That distant face was sculptured in pure anxiety. Karrin was obviously, was definitely, not reporting to President Naro. He wasn't doing anything of the kind.

Rhiannon put these observations one under the other, added them, and got the right answer. He'd been taken. Just as his fellow workers could play incredible jokes on him—when Stevie wasn't around—and have them pan out because of his braincut, so had Spy Karrin pulled a whopper.

Having worked this out, the busy cells slowed down, the lights began to dim behind the giant's dulling eyes. He stood there in the darkness, having one grim determination, and not knowing quite why he had it.

Karrin came out of his office and grunted down the 'scalator, unused to the knee action of climbing and descending. His shadowy figure came across the floor, gradually giving its details. His face was red, his eyes were feathered with red; he hugged the carrycase like a mourning Apache mother.

"Ready?" he asked.

Rhiannon blocked the door; his voice came puzzledly: "I ain't going."

The carrycase thudded to the floor; it didn't bounce, but if it had, the appearance of Karrin's atom pistol would have shaded the second thud. Rhiannon planted his legs like standards.

"I ain't going to fly you anyplace," he said, "an' I ain't gonna let you go either. I—don't know why—I—can't—won't—"

At that moment a door rolled open at the far end of 52, and the tall, wary shapes of Patrolmen blinked through the rectangle of light into the dark pool of the Bed. They made directly for the still lighted office.

Silently, silently! Karrin had to reach to do it. He reached high, standing on tip-toe, and brought the butt of his gun down on Rhiannon's head. The giant made a sound like a baffled ape and took a forward step. His outflinging leg struck the floor without sensation and buckled. The gun went up and came down twice again.

Rhiannon felt a cloth-ripping pain in his head. Static crackled and slammed into his brain. It swelled louder and more penetrating; then muffled down to lengthening drumrolls.

The nebula beckoned him from his straight path back to Polaris. He circled it carefully, although there wasn't any sign of danger. It wasn't a very interesting nebula. He wheeled Karrin's boat once again toward Polaris and his three-headed friends. Sergeant Atoms sat alertly at his side.

Then suddenly, terrifying, the boat pulled away from under their feet and left them cold and lonely in airlessness. The sweet stars began to blink out in clusters; the celestial static dimmed down into the silence of infinite sleep.

From somewhere in this dying universe came a cold and wet nose. It sniffed anxiously at his face and red-matted hair.

A whine. Another louder whine; and a scratch of claws on concrete.

Rhiannon opened his eyes.

There were walls and the concrete floor and the hovering, shadowed cradles. There was the crouching figure of Karrin, seen from below and distorted, framed briefly in the door. There was a mud-colored shadow that sniffed and whined and gave its tail little hesitant twitches.

Then Rhiannon's eyes blinded and closed; he found himself back in that fearful, dimming universe. The distant sparking of the spaceboat's jets—a few stars to shape the emptiness.

Rhiannon's last desperate, melting thought was: Atoms!—Atoms—we gotta catch up to that boat!—come on—we—gotta get back in that—boat—

The scratching claws went away. The last star was lost and the velvet blackness, without entity, was complete.

KARRIN faded as quietly as a cat out the door and hurried into his boat, darted forward to the control-cabin and slammed down a lever. With a rumble the ground-ramp folded in and the hatch sealed itself shut. He leaned against a port and shielded his eyes from the interior glare.

The noise had attracted the Patrolmen

They boiled through the far door and came streaking across the field, their guns spitting tight green flame.

Karrin thumbed his nose at them and laughed. A moment later the boat was clawing its way toward Llarin's stratosphere.

He set the spectro for the tiny moon and turned away to relax on the bunk. His "yacht" embodied principles developed by his own technicians—armament and locomotive potentials unknown to the Patrol—and he knew that he was safe from them. He regretted, however, that the hyper-space drive was useless for such short distances, for with it he might have reached his destination in less than a second. But with it also, at such a range, came the danger of overshooting, nailing himself and the boat a mile into the ground, and so he used the regular blasts and was thankful for his advanced shields. The Patrol might spot him, tail him—but that was all.

Smiling, he stretched out on the bunk, reached for a book, and settled himself for the twenty hour trip.

Beneath the bunk, curled in the warm darkness, Sergeant Atoms had settled himself for the trip long ago, for his master's dying thought-command had been an urgent and overpowering one, and this spaceboat had been pictured and pointed out as clearly from its fellows as had been the "firing button" among the myriad devices on the dummy control board. An obedient but sleepy Atoms had entered the boat almost at Karrin's heels; unheard and unseen in the confusion of rumbling hatches and charging Patrolmen; very eager to get back to his interrupted dream-chase. With all his famous quiet and quiescence—he slept.

After a while Karrin yawned. The cabin seemed stuffy. He looked up from his book and his eyes happened to fall on the oxygen gauge. He felt a momentary chill. As there had been no time to recharge, it was very fortunate that there had been no need: Rhiannon wasn't coming along.

"Almost empty," he breathed. "I'll barely make it." He put the book aside, turned over, and went to sleep.

Hours later, when the oxy-alarm clanged empty!, he roused, sweat-soaked and gasping, to the realization that Rhiannon, in a manner of speaking, had come along after all . . .

L. T. DHENE of the Rebels glanced out his office window, eyes resting puzzledly on the spaceboat that sat silently where it had been brought down by the landing field's tractor-beams. He frowned, then continued writing his report:

"What would seem to have happened is this: Karrin, with a depleted store of oxygen and unaware of the animal's presence, undertook to flee here to escape the Patrol (see Rep. 151 and recordings of Patrol broadcasts M16, 17, N2), and in midpassage discovered the dog which must have somehow contrived to remain out of sight until that time. By then it was too late, for the tanks were empty and the oxygen in the body of the boat was not sufficient to last the trip. He could not turn back, and that he knew we would not risk sending a boat to pick him up is evinced by the fact that he did not call upon us to do so.

"I believe it likely that Karrin debated killing the dog as well as himself, but decided vengefully that the animal—indirectly the cause of his destruction—should suffer the agony of asphyxiation. Therefore he shot only himself (see enclosed microshots, showing interior of boat with corpse exactly as found after boat, due to erratic behavior, was beamed onto field as safety measure). The dog, however—"

Lieutenant Dhene looked up and grinned at the stern-wagging Atoms, working noisily over a *garn* steak beside the desk.

"—the dog, being very small and somewhat addicted to inactivity, survived the trip and led us a merry chase before his final capture. I request that we be allowed to adopt him as a mascot—"

Dhene chewed at his pencil, then laid it on the desk and clapped his hands.

"Here, boy," he growled, "you've given me a crazy kind of report to write up. Come here and give us a hand!—come on, speak! What's the story?"

Sergeant Atoms eyed him for a moment, growled softly, and returned to the steak.



The master-chronometer was a mess of fused cogs and wires.

FLIGHT FROM TIME

By ALFRED COPPEL

The meteor-smashed clock at first meant nothing. Malenson had all the time in the cosmos. Too late, he discovered there can be such a thing as too much time.

A LONG CAREER OF CUTTING corners had taught Malenson the importance of timing. Time, he had long ago concluded, was the fabric from which were cut the garments of poverty or greatness. And since Malenson had no love for the simple life, it naturally followed that he should turn his talents toward the amassing of wealth with the

least possible waste of the precious commodity . . . time.

He didn't bother to conceal his crime. He only timed it well. And following his carefully thought out plans further, he boarded his ship at the proper instant and vanished into the interstellar fastnesses with five million irridium dollars in coin and government certificates.

A galaxy, he reflected, would make a perfect hiding place. One would have only to look at the girdle of the Milky Way on a clear night to see the logic of his choice. Among a billion billion stars separated by light years of brooding emptiness, one man in a small ship would be a fantastically difficult thing to find. Easier by far it would be to find one particular grain of sand on the seashore, than to locate Malenson within the vast limbo of the galaxy.

Only if he made a planetfall on one of the colonized worlds could he be found, and Malenson was no fool. His ship was fueled and provisioned for twelve years in space. With care and a strict system of rationing, he could stretch it out to fifteen years. And at the end of that time he could return safely with his millions, for an enlightened penal system had long ago assigned statutes of limitation to all felonies.

Nor would exile be an unbearable thing. The three hundred foot ship was packed with reading tapes, classical and popular recordings, all manner of occupational therapy devices, and old fashioned books.

Only human companionship was missing, and to Malenson that meant nothing. He had lived a lonely life, isolated from his fellows by a profound sense of his own superiority. He had no love for humanity.

So Malenson and his treasure ship fled from the world of men. Up from the spaceport and into the void he went. As soon as he had cleared the atmosphere, he cut in the second order drive and lifted clear of the ecliptic plane at better than light speed.

Malenson was no navigator, but his spacecraft was fool-proof, and relying on that fact he drove upward and outward from Earth toward the celestial pole. Leisurely, he settled himself for the first short leg of his long voyage. He was completely at ease, for pursuit in second order flight was impossible.

Exactly seventy hours elapsed before he cut the drive for a look around him. The ship was in a moderately starred region of the galaxy. He could still make out most of the familiar constellations. Ursa Major lay ahead and to the right;

Cygnus, a trifle distorted lay overhead. And the beacon stars Rigel, Altair and Sirius were easily recognizable. Sol had dwindled to a yellow star of the third magnitude.

Malenson smiled with satisfaction and pointed the ship's nose at the bright vee of Taurus. The red eye of Aldebaran would make an excellent check point, and his trajectory would be well above Sol and the regular shipping lanes. Then he cut in the drive again and went to bed.

SIX hours later he awoke. Food, automatically prepared in the galley awaited him. He ate and made his way to the control room. He checked the operation of the automatic controls and settled down before the forward ports to watch the sky. Travelling above light speed played strange tricks on his vision. Looking out into the galactic night, it seemed that all the stars were grouped in a distorted mass directly in front of the plunging ship. It was illusion, Malenson knew, but the weird spectacle vaguely disturbed him. He quite illogically felt constrained to cut the drive and check his position. He knew, of course that he was nowhere near Aldebaran yet, but he could not control the sudden urge to see the stars in their proper places.

He cut the drive.

Malenson realized his mistake immediately, for the ship was in the middle of a small meteor swarm. In second order flight it was inviolate, but primary flight slowed it to a point where meteor danger was a real consideration.

Alarm bells jangled and the screen went to work. The bells would have meant an immediate shift back into second order flight to any really experienced spaceman, but Malenson was new to interstellar navigating. He sat and stared stupidly at the danger signals on the panel.

Still, the ship was an almost perfect machine. Certainly it saved Malenson's life. Only one small meteor penetrated the deflectors and crashed through the hull. Malenson flung himself to the deck instinctively as the tiny missile streaked hotly through the oxygen rich air of the control room. Immediately the self sealing

insulation stopped all loss of pressure in the ship, and a repair unit set to work mending the break in the hull plates. But the meteor itself careened through the control room and ripped into the center panel with a smashing of glass and tearing of metal.

Malenson picked himself up and ran to the panel, panic-stricken. He inspected the damage carefully and heaved a sigh of relief. Nothing vital was destroyed. Only the master chronometer and some lesser indicators were hit.

Then Malenson frowned. Without the master timepiece no clock on board would run, since they were all only terminals of the master system. He hurried to his stateroom and checked the wall clock. It smelled of burnt insulation. He pried the face loose and peered at its vitals. They were a mess of fused cogs and wires. A quick check throughout the ship showed that every clock was in the same useless condition. Even if he had been mechanic enough to repair them . . . which he was not . . . they were each and every one a hopeless tangle of burnt out innards. The meteor had short circuited the entire time-keeping system of the ship.

He returned to the control room with some misgivings. The loss of the clocks was no death blow to his kind of trial and error navigation. But it did promise to be a serious inconvenience in the regulation of his life in the timelessness of deep space. He still had his wristwatch, of course, but it was a very delicate ornamental sort of thing, not intended for hard usage.

Still, he reflected brightening somewhat, since his exile was to be measured in years and not minutes and hours, the wristwatch would serve. The star-charts and stellar analyzers that could identify any star would do for navigation. He might become misplaced, but to lose himself completely was impossible. He relied mightily on the fact that his ship was, in fact, fool-proof.

He kept the nose pointed at Taurus and cut in the second order drive again. The rest of the day, he spent in the library, laying out the reading he planned to do for the next few months.

A WEEK later, the ship had passed through Taurus, skirted the Hyades, and was heading outward toward the galactic periphery. It was there that Malenson entertained a slight hope of finding a habitable uncolonized world. And there he could wander for years without the remotest chance of running into any representatives of the Galactic Confederation.

Two weeks later, his wristwatch stopped.

Cursing disgustedly, Malenson shook the recalcitrant bit of jewelry. It ticked fitfully once or twice and stopped. He decided that it must be in need of cleaning. He realized full well that he was not qualified to attempt such a delicate operation, but he also recognized the fact that there was little he could do about it. He needed the watch, and clean it he must; even though he hadn't the vaguest notion of how the thing was done.

Arming himself with alcohol, lens tissue, pliers and a tiny screwdriver, he set to work. Soon all the intestines of the tiny machine lay on the table before him. With great care he cleaned each part and re-assembled them. But when he had finished, the watch would not run. The close work and the lack of success began to wear on him. Malenson did not take kindly to failure. A second time he dismantled the watch and a second time assembled it. The watch stubbornly refused to tick. With a disgusted curse Malenson repeated the process. Still no success. By now his hands were trembling hopelessly, and he knew he should let the job go for a few hours before attempting it again. But Malenson was a stubborn man. A fourth time the watch was dismembered and reassembled. And a fifth time. By now he could not hold the tiny wheels steady enough to mount them on the almost microscopic shafts. His fingers felt like thumbs. When finally the watch was closed up for the sixth time and still would not run, a sudden surge of illogical rage shook him and he slammed the watch furiously against the wall. It dissolved into a miniature shambles of thread-fine springs and tiny wheels. Still raging, he ground the remains to bits under his heel and strode angrily into the galley for a long pull at the brandy bottle . . .

An indeterminate time later, Malenson

staggered up the long companionway and into his stateroom. Drugged with liquor, he sank down on his bunk and dropped into fitful, uneasy, slumber.

THERE was no way of telling how long he had slept. When he awoke, he hurried foggily to the control room and cut the second order drive. The configuration of the stars seemed much the same as he had last seen it . . . how long ago?

Depressed, and somehow still tired, he cut the drive in again and made his way to the galley. Hot coffee made him feel better, shaking some of the haziness out of his mind.

He strove with care to evaluate his situation. There was nothing to worry about, he told himself. The ship was operating perfectly. The only thing that was lacking was a way to compute the passage of time. He half-smiled at that, thinking of his pride in a "sense" of timing. Still, he reflected, perhaps the natural functions of his body would serve. He prided himself on being a methodical, systematic man; one of regular habits.

A gnawing doubt began to eat at his mind. Was that enough? Perhaps it would be wise to construct a timepiece. How? He racked his memory trying to recall the various clocks of the ancients. A mechanical clock was out of the question. He simply hadn't the skill or the materials necessary for its construction. The episode with the watch proved that all too well. An hour glass then? A careful search of the ship was unrewarding. There was nothing that could be made into an hour glass, nor any way to calibrate such a device even if he could make one. A water clock, perhaps? The same objections. And his own lack of know-how. Malenson was no scientist or hobbyist. He was first and last a man of business. Still he did not want to give up easily. A candle clock. Immediately he recognized that idea as impractical.

He didn't have the technical understanding of his ship necessary to use its speed for the computation of time. In fact the only thing he knew about the ship was that it traveled faster than light. How much faster, he had never found out. It

had been enough for his purposes to know that it travelled faster or as fast as any type of vessel in the Confederation. And even if he had known how to make the necessary calculations, what was needed was something that would divide twelve or fifteen years into days, hours, minutes.

Radio reception was out. Each of the colonized worlds had an Earth-type atmosphere . . . complete with Heavyside Layer. And the radar beams that could pierce the layer would be swarming with freighters, liners and . . . Patrol ships. Malenson was certain that by now every patrolman in the known cosmos was alerted for the appearance of a ship of Malenson's type. And detention meant an end to a dream of wealth. Prison.

What was the answer, then?

The answer was . . . no answer.

Malenson, possessed of the finest machine ever devised by the mind of man, and the greatest hoard of wealth in recent times . . . was reduced to keeping track of time by the movements of his digestive tract and a series of scratches on the wall of the control room.

At the time he could see the irony of it. He even laughed . . . then.

Time dragged on sluggishly. What might have been weeks passed by in a seemingly endless cycle of sleeps and meals. Every time he awoke Malenson would cut the drive and check his position. And always, the bright beacon stars stared back at him, little changed.

Slowly, the line of scratches on the control room wall grew. Malenson lived in a timeless limbo amidst the vast, unchanging emptiness of the galactic periphery. For weeks and months at a time, he would lose himself in the sparsely starred outer marches. Then he would find his position again, an agonizingly short distance from the last fix given him by star-chart and analyzer. Lethargically, the ship crawled across parsecs of space, a hollow shell of life amid the cosmic desolation of the great edge.

A year passed. Two. Malenson knew he was safe now. No patrol ship could follow his aimless wanderings. But the ten year statute of limitations remained uppermost in his mind. He realized that he was

assigning an arbitrary value to his days and months, thus he decided that he must stay in space for the full time allowed by his supplies. He could not risk a miscalculation.

THE solitude did not affect him. Malenson had no desire for companionship. And the library of the ship absorbed much of his time. He read great tomes and thin monographs, passionate novels and cold texts. And he could *feel* time slipping by.

At the end of his fourth calculated year, Malenson noticed his feverishness. It was a slight thing. He felt perfectly well. But his temperature stood at 100.6. His curiosity aroused, he confined himself to the ship's infirmary for a month. Except for a periodical trip to the control room for a star sight, he remained under the UV lamps. He took large doses of streptomycin XXV. But he did not feel in the least alarmed when the fever refused to leave him. He merely adapted himself . . .

In his eighth year in space Malenson abandoned any hope of finding a habitable planet. He had located five planetary systems among some nine hundred stars. But none of the globes were even remotely suitable for the support of humanoid life. Mostly they were great gassy worlds of frozen methane and ammonia. The few low gravity planets were generally so close to their primaries as to be parched wastelands with surface temperatures near the melting point of lead.

It was at this point in his odyssey that Malenson's thoughts began to drift homeward. Many sleeps were spent in calculations and trial and error navigation before the ship's nose was turned inward toward the center of the galactic lens. Finally, Malenson was ready to begin the long voyage home.

The loneliness had changed him, he knew. Not that he had once missed the nearness of mere people. Malenson felt himself above such a need. And there was the money in the hold to keep him company. More and more of his time was spent down there, fondling his wealth. The feel of the coins and the crisp irridium certificates more than made up for the solitude.

Uncounted hours would slip by while he sat contentedly in the midst of his loot . . . or was it days? Malenson had stopped trying to discover.

The library had lost its appeal for him now. He had finished the majority of the books now, and strangely the reading tapes and recordings seemed to drag unbearably. It was getting so that he could hardly understand the mouthings that emanated from the speakers, and the vision screens were turgid masses of dark, muddy colors. Something, he decided, had gone wrong with the projection apparatus.

The dawning of his tenth year in limbo was the occasion for a celebration. The statute of limitation was explicit in his particular form of larceny. It stated that should the case be unprosecuted for ten solar years, the crime was stricken from the records and an unequivocal pardon granted. Before Malenson's case, the law had never been evoked. But now at last the time was up. Malenson was free.

He was only three years from Sol now, according to his estimate. He had been careful to allow for the seemingly reduced speed of the ship. But he was still unwilling to take any unnecessary chances. He realized that he could have made a considerable error in his timing. It was even possible, he reflected, that he was as much as a year off. Perhaps even two. So Malenson decided that having waited this long, he could wait yet a bit longer. He had become quite adapted to his artificial environment now, and another two or three years in space would be no great hardship. He set his course for the Centaurian System before heading for home. This slight detour would bring him into Sol's family at just the right time. Fifteen years, he calculated, from the time of his departure.

That night . . . or what passed for night in the timeless void . . . Malenson celebrated his freedom.

TIME slipped by in an endless, formless night. He began to notice that he was aging. The mirror in his stateroom showed lines and wrinkles in his face that had not been there when he fled Earth. He had been just forty when the flight began. He looked fifty three or four now,

at least. It confirmed his computations. His timing was still right . . .

It was a long time later that the Centaurian System slipped astern. He was in the infirmary at the time and did not even notice. Long solitude had dulled his perceptions. He was totally engrossed in the evidence of his thermometer. It registered a body temperature of 117.8. That wasn't possible, he knew. A man couldn't stand such a temperature. Yet he was perfectly well. The instrument, he decided, was faulty. He had not felt feverish since that first time long, long ago. He abandoned the sterile whiteness of the infirmary for the hold and the silent companionship of his money. He was happy there.

The food was gone now, and though there was plenty of fuel in the tanks, the ship was nearing Sol. It had been many, many sleeps since Malenson had bothered to cut the drive for a position check. He sat contentedly with his money, oblivious to all else.

But his ship was still a perfect machine. It arced down into the ecliptic plane, cutting the stellar drive automatically. The ship shifted smoothly into primary flight and spiralled in toward Earth. It set itself a stable orbit around the home planet and waited, alarm bells ringing.

The Earth spread out into a green carpet under the slowly descending spaceship. Malenson sat stiffly in the control chair, eyes drinking in the forgotten beauty of his home world. The ship sank through a layer of fleecy clouds toward the spaceport. Buildings took shape out of the formless mass of the ground. Malenson frowned. Things looked just the same. One would have thought that changes would take place in fifteen years.

He caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the glass of the port. It angered him suddenly that the years should have been so sparing with Earth and so cruel to him. He had aged more than he thought . . . He felt very tired . . .

Very gently, the ship sank to a landing on the busy ramp. The generators sighed, and fell silent. Malenson smiled thinly. His timing was still good. He locked the

hold carefully and made his way to the valve. The long unused mechanism worked smoothly and quickly. Malenson stepped out . . .

A circle of resolute patrolmen surrounded him, hands on their weapons. He stared at them in stunned disbelief.

A young inspector shouldered his way through the file. He spoke words that Malenson heard only dimly through the sudden roaring in his ears.

"You are under arrest, Malenson," the inspector said shortly.

SUBJECT: Report on Prisoner Malenson, File No. 8,697,032

To: Wilton, Chief Penologist, Luna Criminal Detention Center

From: Berry, Director North American Geriatrics Institute

1. Transfer of subject prisoner to this institution is confirmed.

2. cursory examination reveals that the prisoner is a victim of acutely accelerated general metabolism.

3. An interview with the prisoner reveals that he is firmly convinced that he recently spent a period of fifteen years in space, whereas port records conclusively prove that he was absent from Earth for a period of only twenty two months (Ref. N'york Sp. Log 2/890 Pages 867,1098). His condition is perfectly suited to the experimental work now being conducted here, as I suspected. There is an excellent possibility that we may be able to correlate the clinical data of his case with our own hypotheses and so ascertain exactly to what extent senility is the product of psychological conditioning rather than chronological age as heretofore believed.

4. Prognosis negative. In the case of Prisoner Malenson himself, we are unable to prescribe treatment. All efforts to retard his fantastically high metabolism rate have failed. His body temperature is now normal at 120.6° Fahrenheit, and his pulse steady at 140/minute. Definite indications of senescence are appearing. Symptoms of incipient ataxic aphasia have been detected.

5. Death from advanced senility predicted within thirty days.

Signed: Berry, NAGI Director.

THE NIGHT HAS A THOUSAND EYES

By JOHN AND DOROTHY DE COURCY

It was one thing to heave an unwanted girl out into the great black grave of space. But tough old pirate Captain Brace balked at making his own soul walk the plank with her!

THEY STOOD, SILENTLY, SIDE by side, in the crude shelter that passed for a bar on Titan. Its corroded metal walls rang hollowly to the boisterous, animal humor which flowed as freely as drink. Lewd sketches adorned the walls, staring down at the two men, the lewdity of five races to please the lechers of five planets. But all of this was lost on Brace. He was begotten in sin and knew no other life.

The thin-faced man beside him shifted uneasily. "Buy you a drink, Brace?"

"CAPTAIN Brace!" the ape snapped. It was too true to be funny. He looked like an ape. His face was ugly and concave, the nose flattened. His back and shoulders sloped and his arms hung slightly before his body.

"Captain Brace," the other said quickly.

Brace laid one of his paws on the bar, hairy, grotesque. He sniffed loudly and grunted, "Borl!"

The complacent bartender poured three fingers into a glass and Brace's lips quivered slightly over his protruding teeth in humorous pride. No man he knew could drink the stuff straight, this caustic liquor often used to add a poisonous garnish to the drinks of the frail men on earth.

The thin-faced man murmured, "Whiskey," and the bartender poured this with equal nonchalance.

Brace stared at the glass in his hand, prolonging the moment, for he knew many curious eyes watched him. Blood brother to sulphuric acid, someone had called it; Borl, distilled from the roots of a poisonous tree, the touch of whose leaves burned flesh through to the bone.

It was a show worth seeing—and Brace knew it. He knew it hurt, seared his

throat, and made his chest ache, that once he had crushed a glass in his hand in pain afterward. It had hoarsened his voice and burned his lips and tongue so they were like the palm of a workman's hand. But no other man could do it.

He raised the glass to his lips and poured the contents down. The men who were watching drew in their breath but not all of the spectators were men. Some were aliens who expressed surprise or tension in other ways. Venusians' long-unused gill slits rustled. The armadillo-like Saturnians made crackling sounds by shifting their bodies in a slight circular motion. The Martians, almost man-like, made nasal squeeks with the second set of vocal cords behind their palates. The downy-skinned Ionians, pale white in the gloom, made little clicking sounds with their fingers like miniature castanets. Then Brace laid the empty glass on the bar and life resumed in this sump where collected the residue of five races.

The thin-faced man tossed off his whiskey in one gulp, then coughed. Brace threw back his head and roared with laughter, long and loud. The room joined him, but the thin-faced man didn't mind. He laughed too. It was safer.

A PAIR of stained curtains suddenly separated on a little raised platform and all eyes turned toward it, including Brace's bloodshot ones, still jumping from the effect of the drugging Borl. A girl came out, scantily clad, and a spotlight from somewhere centered on her. Two Ionians played rhythmic melodies on a heavy stringed instrument and the girl began to dance.

Men yelled the age-old cry, "Take it off!"



The sand suddenly bubbled and spat behind him.

And she, twirling, smiled, but her face turned pink under the cries and jests.

Followed by the thin-faced man, Brace waddled forward until he stood at the edge of the platform. There was something different here which he sensed rather than saw through the caustic fumes of the Borl. She was young, not a burned out, haggard wreck, heavily daubed, such as he always saw in places such as this. Her limbs were lithe, straight, her face was not pretty, but it was youthful and not a debauched, revolting mask.

As Brace was taking all this in, another man staggered slightly and jabbed him

with an elbow. Without hesitation, Brace's hand caught him on the face, the chopping edge of his ape-hand landing with the crack of a hammer. There was no resentment. The man staggered back, his oft-broken face bleeding from the abrasion on his cheekbone, and Brace kept on watching the girl.

She was slim, almost skinny, which accentuated her pointed, elfin face and high cheekbones. The blue draperies whirled in her wake, as did her shining, black hair. Her brown eyes seemed to be expressionless holes and her full red lips remained fixed, pinned in a professional smile.

Brace's hands now rested on the platform, almost chest high, and sweat tickled down his concave mask unnoticed, his eyes darting after the girl, relentlessly.

THEN, as suddenly as they had opened, the curtains swung closed and the spotlight died. Immediately, Brace vaulted to the platform and ducked through the slit in the curtain. He heard no voices cheering him on and he wondered if in the sudden gloom he had been unseen.

Unhesitatingly, he rolled ahead across the now darkened platform and around the askew backdrop and almost ran into the girl. She gasped and shrank back as Brace reached for her. A door opened and a young man came out, a blond, earth man. Brace looked at him, no more, just looked, and then the young man lunged at him. He didn't throw himself like an animal, he raced in like a panther, his young, small fists cocked professionally.

It was all a blur to Brace, the flying fists, the thudding blows, as he waved his long arms. He stumbled into the backdrop but its cloth surface muffled any sound. Half blind, he clutched the fabric with one hand, then reached with the other and dragged the young man to him.

Brace hadn't meant to hurt him. He had only wanted to drive him away. But he stood there, rubbing his aching knuckles, staring down at the crumpled figure on the floor. There was a big dent in the young man's skull where his head had struck a pipe. Brace was shocked. He hadn't meant to kill him. But he knew he was dead.

The girl knelt quickly beside the young man, her small, trembling hands touching his white face. Brace knew she was going to scream and immediately, his hand closed over her mouth. She struggled but he hardly noticed it. This was bad, very bad, especially here on Titan. The S.P. would like something better than just suspicions in his direction. Sure, the kid had asked for it, but how would it look? He hadn't meant to kill him, but—

His barrel chest heaved while he held the struggling girl and tried to think. He had killed other men. It wasn't remorse.

It was perhaps only a vague instinct which forbade him to kill the young or the weak. He had to get back to the ship. That was it! Once in space, they'd never know. But the girl—the girl— He could kill her too but—

With a grunt, he heaved her figure over his shoulder and moved down the gloomy hallway to a metal door. With the toe of his shoe, he opened it, glanced outside into the darkness, then heaved himself and his burden through the opening, pulling the door shut with his foot.

They were on the edge of the settlement. That was a break. He carefully skirted lighted buildings. The air, thin and cold, barely rustled his garments as he ran steadily on.

There was just one more place to pass, another bar. Brace hesitated in the gloom, holding his burden tightly. A man emerged from the bar, paused, then began walking toward them. Brace shrank back into the shadows. The man's footsteps drew closer. Brace tried to withdraw himself further but the girl began to struggle. The footsteps stopped, Brace heard a shuffling sound, then the footsteps receded. Brace peered around the corner just in time to see the man re-enter the bar.

Tensely, Brace walked toward the lighted area. If someone should come out— He came abreast of the bar and through the grimy, plastic portholes, he saw the faces of men, brief, fleeting images. Then he was past, running, and the darkness closed about them again. He ran until he was out in the sandy wastes, beyond the settlement. Then he stopped.

"If you scream, I'll kill you," he grunted into the girl's ear. He dropped his hand from her mouth, set her on her feet, but kept a firm hold on her wrist. He couldn't make out her features in the gloom but he could hear her panting.

"Let me go!" she gasped.

"Shut up!" The snarl was deadly, vicious, and it choked off the words that were bubbling up in her throat. "Now listen, you! I killed him and that's that. I didn't mean to but that doesn't make him any less dead. The S.P. doesn't like me and I think they might like to line me up in front of a jet."

ABRUPTLY, the girl began to cry and sank down onto the sand. Brace was annoyed and didn't know what to do. If he'd had any sense, he would have killed her back there. Then he could have come back in the front way and had another drink. The boys on the ship would swear they had met him outside, gone with him to the ship, then walked back with him. Sure, there would be two bodies, but he would have been in the clear. He couldn't turn her loose now. He couldn't kill her either.

Resignedly, he realized he had to take her with him. "Come on!" he grunted, pulling her erect.

Her sobbing died away to a muffled sniffing as he pulled her along relentlessly after him. They were far enough from the settlement so her scream wouldn't carry. Their feet crunched on the sand, though the sound was thin and wispy, the ghost of the sound of earth feet trodding earth sand. Brace noted a vague yellowness before him in the sky. It would be getting light soon. He had to get to his ship. The S.P. might already be nosing around.

The lightness was more distinct when they reached the place where the ghostly hulks of space craft lay like sleeping whales, inert leviathans that could in an instant become flaming dragons, leaping and screaming into the darkness. Brace threaded his way through them until he caught a glimpse of his own scarred ship, neither larger nor smaller than the average, its blunt nose pointing slightly away to his left. He stopped suddenly when he saw a shadowy figure standing near it.

"If you scream now—" Abruptly, he made a short, chopping motion with his fist and the girl slumped unconscious. He shouldered her and began a careful approach. There was still a hundred feet to cover, the sky was growing lighter every minute, but the shadowy figure by his ship remained motionless.

Brace stood in the shadow of the fin of a neighboring ship and turned plans over in his mind. It was no use. During that whole hundred feet he would be outlined against the sky. Then a sound tensed him, the whine of a sand car behind him. He crouched low, prepared to duck. This

was it. Nobody on Titan had sand cars but the S.P. The miners used big atomotors.

BRACE lunged around the edge of the fin to shield himself from the oncoming lights. The sand car whizzed past him and hissed to a smooth stop. *

They had seen him. Brace spun and ran, sand spurting behind him. He skidded under the huge belly of one ship, scrambled across to another—

Something crackled in the air—dust motes or insects caught in the S.P. ray—and suddenly-molten sand bubbled and spat behind him.

But the blast was not followed by a closer one and Brace realized they were only shooting at random; he heard the ray hissing in another direction. He hurtled down the next alley and then forced himself to slow down to a shuffling run as he neared his own ship. His sprinting feet would leave too obvious tracks.

Near the stern of his ship he stopped, his fingers fumbling over the smooth side, at last finding the knob. He shoved it inward. If the port squeaked—if one of the S.P. men came around the side of the ship— But the port didn't squeak. It opened silently. And Brace stepped in. He pressed another button, and the port closed. He was in.

Brace walked swiftly to his cabin, opened the door and dropped the unconscious girl on his bunk. Quickly, he stripped off his coat and shirt and mussed his hair. The catch on one of his shoes stuck and he cursed as he ripped it off. Breathing rapidly, he waited for the sound of the buzzer, and when it came, he snatched up his heavy coat and threw it over his shoulders. As he stepped into the companionway, another cabin door opened and another figure, hastily coated stepped out.

"I'll get it!" Brace growled.

The other, startled, looked at him and said, "Yes, sir."

Brace pushed past him, turned into another companionway and walked to the main fork. He pressed a stud and the inner door opened. Stepping into the compartment, he pressed another stud, watched

the inner door close and the outer one open. He gulped to equalize the change in air pressure in his ears.

AN S.P. man flicked on a light and shined it full in Brace's face. Brace touched a button and flooded the entire port with light. "What do you want?" he snapped. "I'm not blasting off for two hours! Come back in an hour!"

"Is this him?" one of the S.P. men asked the other. The other nodded.

The first man who had spoken turned back to Brace. "We're not looking into your take-off, Captain. We're investigating a killing."

"What do you want me to do? Solve it for you?"

The S.P. man took the insult but stiffened a little. "No, sir. We'd like to examine your ship. There's a girl missing."

"Oh!" Brace shouted sarcastically. "Then she **MUST** be on my ship! It's just swarming with kidnapped women! It **COULDN'T** be any other!" He waved his ape-like arm toward the collection of hulls.

The S.P. man's lips tightened into a thin line.

Brace ran his thick fingers through his hair, studying them for a moment, then asked, "Do you have a search permit?"

"No sir," the S.P. man replied, "but we thought, under the circumstances, your courtesy might—"

Brace snorted. "You could get one in half an hour—but—it would interrupt my breakfast." He scowled. "All right—come on!"

The two S.P. men stepped into the port and Brace jabbed the closing button viciously. "Now have a good look, because it's going to be your last look at anybody's ship!"

"You're going to file an objection?" the S.P. man asked.

Brace threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Am I going to file an objection!" he gasped. "Why, I'm going to ground my ship and personally stay here until they yank the shields off you!"

"Well, sir, if that's the way you feel, Captain, we'll not search your ship until we have an official permit."

"You're in my ship now!" Brace snapped.

"So come on! Have a good look!"

"Sir, if you'll accept our apologies . . . we don't wish to intrude on your legal status . . ."

Brace motioned toward the companionway. "Do you want to search it or not?"

"Captain Brace," the S.P. man said stiffly, "it's only a routine search. We're quite convinced that a man of your standing wouldn't jeopardize his ship and, if you'll consider the incident closed, I'll be glad to see that no further trouble is given you."

The S.P. men had made a mistake by stepping in the ship of course, and Brace could make much out of it. He grinned to let them know that he'd like nothing better than to make much of it.

"Would that be satisfactory, sir?" the S.P. man asked.

Without taking his eyes off the man, Brace jabbed the opening button. His face was not distorted, yet it carried the feeling, the hint of a snarling, savage animal. In the atmosphere of such unspoken animosity, the S.P. men stepped out as the outer port opened. Brace watched them climb into the sand car and back away, then he thumbed the air-lock control, waited for the inner door to open, and entered the ship.

HIS mate was standing inside, a tall, heavy man with beetling brows, a man who obviously tried hard to emulate his Captain.

"Well?" Brace demanded.

"None of my business," the mate answered, shrugging, "but I think you should have given it to them. What crust! 'May we look your ship over?' I'd have let them look over the end of my fist!"

Brace bared his teeth in anticipation of the effect of his words. "I couldn't," he growled. "The girl's in my cabin." Then he pushed by the astonished mate, turned in the companionway and burst into a roar of laughter. "Fouled 'em up again!" he shouted.

The mate stared dumbly at Brace for a moment, then shrugging, went off in the other direction.

Brace stood outside his cabin door, spec-

ulating. What should he do now? Finding no answer to his question, he opened the door and stepped in.

The girl was sitting on the edge of his bunk. She looked at him, then down at her hands, as though the sight of him was repulsive to her. When she looked up at him again, her level eyes made Brace wince. She didn't seem afraid like he expected her to be. She was defiant.

"I see you're awake," Brace said. He hadn't meant to growl that way, but he couldn't help it.

She clenched her hands and glared at him. "Why didn't you kill me like you did my brother?"

"I'm sorry," Brace replied. "I didn't mean to kill anyone. Not that I have any objection to killing if it's necessary. In this part of space, you kill when you have to—but—well your brother was an accident."

He watched tears come to her eyes and scowled. "What's done is done! I didn't mean to kill your brother, but he's dead, and there's nothing anyone can do about it!"

She cried softly for a few moments, then sighing, brushed the tears from her eyes. Brace leaned against a wall and stared at the deck, sorting through plans and discarding them.

"I believe you," she said quietly, and it startled Brace. "I believe you when you say it was an accident. I promise not to tell anything about it to anyone. Now will you let me go?"

Brace shook his head. "I can't."

"But what do you intend to do with me?" she demanded.

"I don't know!" Brace paced the floor. "I can't let you go. That's certain. I can't even leave your body." He looked at her steadily, his jaw tightening. "I'll be frank with you, miss. I made a mistake. I meant no harm but I killed a man. You saw me do it. I'm in bad with the S.P., everyone here is, and they'd like nothing better than a charge against me. You are that charge. It would mean my life, the lives of my mate and officers, and my crew would be imprisoned, if I let you go." He paused. "I may have to chuck you out in space."

She said nothing, just stared at him, and Brace went back to his pacing.

"But—but—I won't tell," she said, falteringly. "I promise not to say a thing."

Brace shook his head. "The S.P. would make you tell anything they wanted you to tell."

HER lips quivered and her head dropped. Brace didn't feel good about it. She was just a kid. He'd have felt much better if she was a man. What was a girl like her doing in Titan anyway? She had no business being in this hole. There was never anything but trouble on Titan.

Brace sat down. "You said he was your brother."

She nodded.

"Well, what were you two doing here? You don't look like the people who usually land here, especially stay here for any length of time."

She sighed and bit her lip. "My—my brother and I were members of a traveling theater. He got into a fight with the manager—my brother is—was—very temperamental and he insisted on being let off at the nearest port. The ship came here and—I decided to stay with my brother. It was only after the ship had gone that we discovered we only had enough money for one passage back to earth. So—I—"

Brace got up suddenly. "Never mind," he said, brusquely. He didn't want to hear any more. He straightened. Well, that's the way life was. Some people got the breaks, some didn't. It wasn't his fault. At least, it would be a quick death. He'd see to that.

"I'll have some food sent to you," Brace said, opening the door. She didn't look up, nor did she answer, and Brace hesitated a moment before stepping out of the cabin. It was just momentary, then he closed the door behind him and walked on down the companionway.

There was some strange humor, he reflected, in the fact that a thin, almost skinny girl was the greatest danger he'd ever faced, his greatest threat. The S.P. might return at any time. There were still two hours almost and he didn't dare blast off early. If he could only get—He

realized abruptly that the mate was standing in the companionway, staring at him.

"Barrows!" Brace grunted. "Get the men together in the mess room."

TABLEWARE lay in mute rows and the only sound was the humming ventilator. Brace sat down in a chair to wait until the men had all filed in. They were cast in the same mold, and forged to the same temper as their Captain, brittle, hard, unyielding. When they had assembled around the table, Barrows closed the door.

"The ship's locked, Captain," Barrows said. "The girl can't escape."

Brace nodded, got up, and stared at his men, one by one, seventeen of the fiercest toughest men ever baptised in the maw of space and all threatened by a stupid girl. Brace's hoarse voice resounded in the room as he told about the night before, chronologically, neither adding nor detracting. They listened without comment.

"There's an out for some of you," Brace finished. "I can give you your papers and a note to Captains of ships which happen to be here now. They'll sign you on and the S.P. won't be able to find you guilty of anything. They won't even be able to prove you're my men. As for you, Barrows, you can sign on with Grant and he'll doctor it up so that it'll look like you signed on a couple of days ago."

"Naw, not me!" Barrows said, disgustedly.

A chorus of rejections went up at once. It wasn't loyalty to their Captain, just a mutual hatred for the S.P.

The second cook, however, walked toward Brace. "I'll take my papers, Captain," he said quickly.

The Chief Cook took one step. No one actually saw the fist land, but they watched the second cook slide across the deck and come to rest in a limp heap. Then the Chief Cook grinned at Brace, revealing two missing teeth.

"The second cook has changed his mind, Captain," he said.

The men laughed.

"All right, men," Brace said, sobering quickly. "We've got about an hour and a half to wait. That gives us enough time

to eat, and then we'll see if we can get into space."

"First watch on duty!" Barrows shouted.

Several men left and the others straggled out after them. The Chief Cook disappeared into the galley, dragging his assistant after him.

When the men had gone, Barrows turned to Brace. "Goin' a chuck her out in space?"

Brace rubbed his chin. "I don't know. I'll figure it out after we blast off."

The port buzzer rang hollowly through the ship. Tensing, Barrows looked at the Captain, then his hand slid inside his jacket and he pulled out a large atoblast and hefted it.

"Put away the toy," Brace grunted. "I'll bluff 'em. If I can't, you get 'em from the companionway and we'll blast off."

Barrows nodded and followed Brace into the companionway. The big mate stopped at the corner, waiting just out of sight with his gun held level.

BRACE waddled down the short companionway and stepped into the port. A moment later, the other port opened and Brace exhaled sharply when he saw the thin-faced man he'd met in the bar standing before him. His feet shifted uneasily in the sand under the Captain's unflinching gaze.

"Well!" Brace bellowed.

"I want to talk to you, Captain Brace."

In answer, Brace jabbed the closing button.

"Or shall I talk to the S.P.?" the thin-faced man shouted through the closing crack.

Brace jabbed the opener and stood impassively as the portal swung wide.

"That's better," the man on the ground said, smiling.

Brace's paw reached down and jerked him into the portal by the front of his tunic. They stood there as the portal closed, face to face, Brace's eyes burning into the livid terror of the other man.

"You aren't going to talk to anybody," Brace muttered, throwing him into the companionway.

"I got friends who are watching!" the

little man yelped. He slithered away. "It won't do any good to kill me!"

Barrows came around the corner. He took one look at the cringing figure and disgustedly tucked the atoblast back into his tunic. Then he reached for the thin-faced man.

"Wait!" Brace snapped.

The little man, shaking violently, got to his knees, then to his feet. "Now Captain, I want you to understand I didn't come here to threaten you. I've got a business proposition. Strictly business!" He drew a long breath and some of his confidence returned. "And, I may be able to do you some good.

Brace glared at him, then turned to Barrows. "Check on the cargo!" he growled.

Barrows nodded and started in the direction of the Captain's cabin.

"Come on!" Brace grunted when Barrows was out of sight. He led the thin-faced man forward to the tiny chart room, let him in, then closed the door. "All right, what have you got to say?"

"Well—ah—first of all, Captain, I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Gartland. I'm a trader."

Brace studied him. "I've heard of you."

"Well, in that case, you know I'm an honest man—always seeking good business—both for a little profit and—to give others a helping hand."

"Get to the point!" Brace snapped.

Gartland's face lost its smile and became hard. His eyes gleamed brightly and Brace half expected him to hiss like a snake. "I—I—came to discuss your cargo. Now, you realize that it's a dead loss to you. In fact, it will be hard to get off your hands."

Gartland waited, but Brace didn't speak, didn't move.

"I'll be frank with you," Gartland continued. "I had my eye on that item and you—sort of beat me to it. Actually though, you've taken a lot of risk, gone to a lot of work, and that's something I'm willing to pay for."

BRACE still studied him, meditating. Out here, he knew there were places where a woman, almost any woman would

bring a fair price, if you dealt in that sort of thing.

"You see, you'll be saving yourself a lot of trouble—and me too." Gartland hesitated, eying Brace. "The price is a hundred units."

Brace sniffed.

"Or shall we say a hundred fifty units. That's the most I can go. And you realize, of course, that I'm throwing in a certain amount of protection. Besides, what else can you do with the—ah—cargo?" Gartland waited for an answer, then shrugging, he rose. "My men may be getting a little nervous, Captain." He looked at Brace again, speculatively. "Think it over. I'll have one of my ships contact you in space."

Gartland paused and pulled a small notebook from his pocket. Taking an elaborate stylus, he scribbled a note on it. "Just give this to the man who contacts you and he'll take care of everything."

Brace took it and motioned toward the companionway. He had no intention of admitting anything. Gartland turned and walked ahead. Silently, they entered the port and the inner door swung closed.

The outer portal opened on the sandy waste, brightly lit, chilling. The vast crescent of Jupiter lay on the horizon ahead, reflecting brilliant light across the glistening sand. The sun, like a giant star, lay close near the horizon, forty five degrees from the half illumined bulk of Jupiter. The huge planet, however, radiated warmth, while the sun seemed cool and distant and somehow removed.

Gartland stepped onto the sand, his feet making the weird and wispy crunches characteristic of Titan, and Brace touched a button and re-entered his ship.

"Did you throw the scum out?" Barrows asked.

Brace looked up. The tall mate was standing impassively beside the port. Brace grunted.

"I suppose he wanted to buy 'er," Barrows said, "but from what I've heard, it's taking more than a chance to deal with him."

Brace walked up the companionway toward the mess room.

"Well, it's none of my business," Barrows growled, following him, "except that

he talks. Any deal you make with him—"

Brace scowled. "I didn't make any deal. One of his ships is supposed to meet us."

Barrows snorted. "I say, chuck her out! It's a cleaner way to die, anyway."

"Shut up!" Brace barked. He tucked the folded paper in his pocket and entered the mess room. Why should he care, he wondered. The Gorgon III was only a tramp. The men on it were space-rats. And the waste port had taken many a body and expelled it with an explosive poof of air into the velvet tranquility of space. He'd watched unemotionally as a spotlight had followed many lifeless hulks of men, sometimes moving straight like an arrow, other times rotating or turning slowly, end over end. Some day, he might do it himself; begin that long, gradual fall toward the sun, or perhaps his body would answer to the cosmic law of the planets, his lifelessness immortalized in a great circle about the sun.

BRACE looked at the food laid before him and stirred it with a fork. The weight of the food on his fork was slight and he pictured the lightness of the girl's fragile form. With only one hand, he could place her in that chute and close the door to the port. In his mind, he pulled the release lever, heard the dull thump of escaping air, saw her wheeling away, pinioned in the glare of light, spinning around and around like a ballet dancer, just as he had seen her spin around and around on the stage.

She wouldn't resist. She would accept death. But she'd go spinning, pirouetting into the lordly sun, or perhaps the sun would be pleased by her dance and would bid her dance forever around it.

Abruptly, Brace's big paw smashed his cup on the table and it shattered. The men looked at him curiously, watched him rise, the broken handle still in his clenched fingers, brown droplets of coffee sinking into his tunic. Then he turned and walked out of the mess room.

He hesitated before the door of his cabin. His fingers relaxed and the broken handle fell to the deck. The hand which rested on the knob came away and he rapped on the door with his knuckles.

"Come in," she called.

He opened the door, stepped into the room and straightened himself, his face perhaps being more ferocious in his attempt to cover his disturbed mind. Idly, he noted the tray of untouched food. She was still sitting on the edge of the bunk, her face pale and drawn.

"Everything all right?" Brace asked evenly.

She nodded.

"We'll be blasting off soon," he said. "Better stay in the bunk." He turned, opened a small door and drew out a one piece uniform. Without looking at her, he picked up a pair of boots, a cap, and took his log book from a drawer. "I'll leave you my cabin," he murmured.

She didn't answer.

Brace thumbed through his log, unseeing. There was no sound in the room for a long time except his heavy breathing and the swishing of the leaves of the log. Finally he looked up and said, "I'm not doing this because I want to." The words seemed empty and hollow. "Kid, these are the breaks!" He wished desperately she wouldn't look at him that way. He hesitated, then said, "If you had your choice—that is—you could die, quick and clean—or—well—you could live—but not so clean—"

She stared at him blankly for a moment. "I—I—guess we all have to die sometime. It's much better to die quickly, instantly—than—to drag it out. Nobody wants to die—but when you have to—maybe it's not so bad."

"Yeah, I knew you'd want it that way." Brace turned and opened the door. "You're a nice kid," he murmured. "Wish I'd never seen you."

IN the control room, Brace waited by his acceleration chair until the pilot and the mate entered. The signal man closed and dogged the entrance, then settled into his chair. He threw some switches and droned into a microphone, "Gorgon III, Clearance No. 13749. Out of Titan, Sullivan City to Mars. Cargo as inspected."

There was a short pause, then a mechanical voice said, "Clearance, Gorgon III. Luck."

Brace cinched the webbing tighter across his chest and nodded.

"Raise 1.8 G's," Barrows ordered.

Immediately, the ship jarred and Brace sank into his chair. The sustained roar from the jets thundered through the ship, making the panels and bulkheads rattle.

Minutes passed, then the pilot called, "Atomic Height!"

"Cut in the atomics!" Barrows ordered. "2 G's."

The atomic converter's whine ran through the metal structure of the ship and the roar of the jets died away to the deeper boom of the atomic drive. Brace sank a little further into the cushions.

"3 G's!" Barrows ordered.

Brace sank still further into the cushions, the pressure holding him firm. Breathing was more of an effort. Barrows rested his head on the cushion of the acceleration chair and closed his eyes. The pilot watched down his nose at the dials before him, his leaden hands resting on the soft arms of his chair.

Already, the small ports in front showed the purple blackness of the fringe of space and then the purple deepened to a solid charcoal black.

Brace wondered how the girl was taking the acceleration. This was no kid-glove passenger liner, yet three G's wasn't so bad. He hoped she'd stayed in the bunk. Thinking was hard. The pressure seemed to drag thoughts from his mind. He didn't want to think about the girl and he tried to shake his mind free.

There were millions of women in the system, billions! So she disappeared! She wouldn't be the first. So she'd end up in a brothel on a pleasure asteroid! What difference did it make? She'd eat well! Or maybe it would be the pleasure palace of some earth man or Martian. It was a soft life. And it was *life*. But it made him angry that he should care. At least, Gartland had given him a way out.

The voice of Barrows intruded on his thoughts. "We're in clear space now. Let's get rolling!"

"Wait!" Brace barked. He hated himself for speaking. Any space man worth the name could take six or seven G's, but he thought of the girl. She looked fragile,

and not too well fed. Suppose she died? So what? So he wouldn't have to think about Gartland or her ever again. Chuck her in the waste port! Again, he saw her pirouetting through space, cast off by the scum of the universe and received by the lord of the universe, the great, flaming orb.

"Cut the acceleration!" Brace snarled. "Make it one and a half G's!"

The springs of his chair whispered their release as the acceleration eased. Brace unsnapped the safety belt and heaved himself out of the chair and to a hand hold. The deck was straight up and down.

"Adjust for floor gravity!" Brace ordered.

Obediently, the pilot cut the stern jets and for an instant, they were in free fall. Then the under jets cut in and Brace was pressed to the deck. Prostrate, he watched the stars wheel before the front port, slow down in their movement, and stop.

"One G," Brace said, rising. He stood upright, straightened his cap, and walked to the port.

BRACE walked slowly down the companionway, his eyes fixed straight ahead. "Chuck her out!" he muttered. "Chuck her out!" It was a clean, swift, merciful death. There was nothing clinging about it, none of the sickness that he felt when he thought of putting her into Gartland's hands.

"It isn't her," he murmured. "I just can't stomach scum like Gartland." He wished he'd killed him, taken a chance on dodging the S.P. Maybe Gartland had been bluffing. Maybe he'd been alone. Brace toyed with the idea of returning to Titan. No, that was too risky. Besides, the girl . . . "Well, might as well get it over with," he muttered.

He straightened and rapped at the door. Her answering voice was tremulous. Perhaps that deep essence of woman had told her that time had run out. Maybe men knew it too. Maybe everybody knew when their time came to die.

He thrust these thoughts aside and stepped into the cabin. The girl was still on the bunk. Its free floating gimbals had swung it back.

"The acceleration bother you?" Brace asked.

"No," she replied, quietly.

He walked over and stood by the bunk. The girl rose slowly and sat, staring up at him. "You're going to do it now?"

Brace looked down at his gnarled hands, clenched his fingers and studied them. "Would you like anything?" he asked slowly.

She looked up at him helplessly, frightened. Then she looked quickly around the room in frantic darts, as though grasping, groping for something. "I—I—don't know—I guess I'd like to see the stars—just once more."

Brace compressed his lips. "Yeah—sure." He took a deep breath and turned partly away. He stood there, awkwardly for a moment, then said, "Come on, kid."

His hairy hand closed over her small one as he helped her up from the bunk. The diaphanous dancing costume fluttered as she moved, and for some reason, he kept hold of her hand until they reached the cabin door. He opened it for her and she stepped through. He dared not to look at her face as they stood outside the cabin, smooth, youthful skin, dark brown eyes holding all of that deep hurt and reproach which men see in the eyes of a dying doe. He looked away quickly.

"This way," Brace said, walking ahead. He couldn't bring himself to look at those eyes again. Not yet, anyway.

They stopped in the companionway, even with the port, and Brace climbed a set of iron rungs set in the wall. His fingers fumbled with the dogs on a small hatch, then he threw it back. The girl climbed up after him and he leaned down to lift her into the astrogator's bubble. His strong, tough hands clasped her under the shoulders and lifted her into the small room whose top was a transparent hemisphere, large enough for a man to stand upright under it. She was warm, soft, yet firm to his touch and he hesitated an instant before letting her go.

Then terror clutched at him. He couldn't do it! He couldn't! Better Gartland's life than no life at all. She was too young, too much alive to die.

He kicked the hatch closed, shutting out

the light from beneath, and they stood alone, a man and a woman amid the stars.

Women are funny, Brace thought. They know things. She knows what I have to do. She isn't fighting. He swallowed with difficulty and looked at her. She was standing straight, looking up at the stars. There were millions of them in the black of space, myriads of lights in a sea of night.

"The night has a thousand eyes," she murmured.

A TINGLE RAN through Brace's nerves. *The night has a thousand eyes. The night has a thousand eyes.* Who had said that? The memory eluded him, played tag with him, then he caught it. It was so long ago—or did it only *seem* long ago?

It was the great Martian Central Spaceport and the night overhead, the bowl of heaven as infinitely far away, as infinitely contemptuous of man as it was now, yet somehow watching. He was fifteen. By day, he sweated, loading, stacking, clamping down great crates and bales in the hulls of giant ships, hating them, hating the sky, hating all things, a tough, space-rat kid, knowing no father or mother but work, sweat, and the fists of others.

Then the ship had landed, a great passenger liner which carried only the finest cargo. Its captain was so tall, so ramrod straight, as though he had not a backbone like other men but a bar of chilled steel. And the girl had come from that ship, the captain's daughter. She had no mother either and they had found a strange kinship.

They had sat by the towering hulk of that huge ship and she'd said it—*the night has a thousand eyes*—and he'd loved her with the love of a thousand hearts. Yet she was as forever removed from him as were the thousand eyes of night. But what was her name? Cecelia! And what came after *the night has a thousand eyes*? He didn't know, couldn't remember. Her tall, straight father had come out then and without hesitation, had struck him down and the night had ten thousand times a thousand eyes.

But he'd seen her again, through the steel fencing of the Spaceport. He was

on the outside. Her father had seen to that. Through scalding tears, he had seen her, and he swore that someday he would have a ship, that someday he would be a captain. And the young love had poured from his heart leaving an empty shell behind, and from that emptiness, he watched the ship rise and disappear, unashamed tears streaming down his homely face. She had said she would wait, that she'd wait forever, and then—

Brace stopped remembering and put one hairy paw over his face. He was a captain now, captain of a dirty, battered hulk that plied the spaces decent ships disdained. He had a crew, if you wanted to call it that, and he carried cargo, sometimes legal-ly, most times not.

He fought against the memories that kept struggling back. He didn't want to remember the excited voices of the commentators, the descriptions of the crash in space, the long list of the dead. Only one name on that list had any meaning for the ragged, homely youngster. His heart and soul were burned and seared to one mass of scar. He would become a captain. He would fight the space that had taken his gem. He would fight it, and the men in it.

Brace sighed, and looked up at the stars. But was he fighting space? Or was he fighting a memory, the memory of a girl? And what about this girl—was he fighting her? Suddenly, he felt rotten, inside and out.

Brace looked down at the girl beside him. The kindly light of the stars mellowed the outlines of her face. It could have been the face of Cecelia. Starlight was kind, but no one could ever be so beautiful as Cecelia, never. No, she wasn't Cecelia, yet in one way they were the same, that same smallness and frailty against the backdrop of a cruel space ship and its even crueler Captain.

He took a deep breath and straightened himself resolutely. "Wait here," he whispered hoarsely, and he quickly backed down the ladder to the companionway.

AS Brace entered the control room, Barrows looked up. "We've been stalling that space rat."

"Who?"

"Gartland!"

Brace stared at him blankly for a moment.

"Well, you shoved her out, didn't you?"

Barrows asked, annoyed.

Brace pushed passed him and walked to the communication panel. "Put him on, Sparks."

The communication officer pressed the key before him several times. There was a pause, then the opaque panel lit up with the thin face of Gartland.

"Ah, Captain Brace. I thought you might miss our little rendezvous. We had quite a time finding you."

"Well, I'm here!" Brace snarled. He didn't like him. It even made him feel dirty to talk to him.

"I imagine you're a little surprised to see me."

"Hmmm," Brace murmured.

"Yes," Gartland continued, "I'm a little surprised myself. Well—the S.P. and I were going to have a little trouble so—I decided to move. If I'd known it, I could have—ah—removed your cargo on Titan."

Brace grunted at the face on the panel. "I'll bring it to you in a life craft."

"Oh that won't be necessary, Captain Brace."

"I WANT it that way!" Brace snapped.

Gartland shrugged. "All right, then. We'll hold our position. We're about a thousand kilos sunward. Maybe I'll offer you a drink, if we've got anything strong enough."

Brace cut the switch without answering and scowled. "Hold your position!" he snapped to the pilot. He then looked at the impassive face of Barrows, studying him. "You're in command," he said finally. Ignoring the mate's curious stare, he turned and left.

BRACE stood by the iron ladder in the companionway. "Come down, girl!" he called.

She came slowly down the ladder, then turned and faced him. He looked into those soft, brown eyes again. Cecelia's eyes had been brown. Slowly, his ape-like hand reached into his tunic. She closed her eyes, waited, then opened them

again, startled, when the hairy hand pressed a wad of money into her palm.

"W—w—what?"

"Come on!" he said roughly, and took her by the wrist. He led her down the companionway and stopped at the door of the mess room. "Put that stuff away!" he ordered.

Uncomprehending, she obeyed and put the money into the bodice of her costume. Then Brace opened the mess room door and motioned for her to enter.

The second cook saw them, started, and watched apprehensively. When Brace had closed the door, he turned to the second cook. "Come here, you!" he ordered.

Obediently, the cook came forward, eyeing the girl curiously.

"You're going to do something for me!" Brace said, quietly. He studied the man. He was younger than the rest of his crew, not quite as tough as he might be. "Do you want to get out of this with a whole skin?"

The cook touched his bruised jaw. "Yes sir," he muttered.

"Then take her, and get into number five lifeboat, and go back to Titan. Tell the S.P. you rescued her." He turned and glared at the girl. "And you tell them the same!" He turned back to the cook. "Is that clear?"

The cook nodded.

"Then MOVE!" Brace barked.

The cook jumped, motioned the girl out and followed.

Brace sank down onto a chair. "I should never have had that drink," he murmured. He reached over and slowly poured himself a cup of coffee. He drank it leisurely, quietly, staring at the table in front of him. When the coffee was half gone, he felt the thump of a lifeboat going free and he laughed softly. What would Barrows think when he felt a second thump?

He rose then, leaving his coffee, and walked swiftly down the companionway to an escape hatch. In a moment, he had sealed himself in a life craft and then he hesitated, his finger on the release lever.

No, he decided. The case was only

against him, no one else. The girl would tell them she'd never seen anyone but him. She couldn't give them a description of Barrows or the others even if they tried to trick her. Of course, the second cook had brought her breakfast. But he'd already taken care of that. That just leaves Gartland—and he wouldn't do any talking. He ranmed the lever home and with a shock, the tiny craft swung away from the mother ship.

Viciously, Brace slammed the acceleration lever wide open and stared ahead through the transparent port at the stars. "The night has a thousand eyes," he murmured. His lips clamped tight over his bulging teeth. As his ship circled, the sun came into view, big, hot, and glaring, yet small against the backdrop, and the little ship screamed toward it. What was it? What was that other line? He'd almost had it then. She'd said that other line. Sun? Sun? No, but it was something like that.

His piercing eyes stared into the hot disk of the sun and Brace finally made out the tiny speck of Gartland's ship. He had to remember. He HAD to. Automatically, his fingers adjusted the controls until the pointed nose lined up on the middle of the ship ahead. He muttered, repeating over and over, *the night has a thousand eyes—the night has a thousand eyes*. Gartland's ship loomed larger and Brace pounded the acceleration lever against the stop. As he screamed onward, Brace fought, struggled, strained to remember. He MUST remember. Then it came, and the tension in him snapped. *The night has a thousand eyes and the day has but one*.

"THE NIGHT HAS A THOUSAND EYES AND THE DAY BUT ONE!" he yelled.

The bulk of the ship ahead all but blotted out the sky and the homely face staring at it was laughing while tears poured down his face. That instant before eternity seemed to prolong itself as if unwilling to die, and Brace closed his eyes. His voice was young and clear as he cried, "Cecelia, Cecelia! I'm coming!"



They had caught up with him at last!

THE GREEN DREAM

By BRYCE WALTON

Owen Barslaag had brought terror to the swamp people. Joha, the little Venusian maid, was determined that he should not leave without it.

JOHA, WHO WAS PART VENU-SIAN, twined her translucent fingers through the Earthman's matted hair. She smiled. Strangely, from her light green face, red eyes shone with a terrible hatred and a malignant purpose. But the man asleep on the couch of lizard-skin softened with layers of wing-feathers from the

Kuh-Kuri Swampbird, was unaware of that evil, almost lustful hate—for it blazed outward from her delicate face only while he slept.

The greenish glow from her body seeming to alienate her from anything human, she squatted cross-legged on the damp tamped-earth floor beside him. His body

was long and gaunt, his face angular with deeply sunken eyes which were closed in exhausted sleep. Only a slight twitching of his facial muscles and an occasional jerking of his body signified the horror of his growing nightmare.

She withdrew her hand. Her eyes blazed more brightly like evil jewels into his, piercing the closed lids with invisible beams of malignant and gloating resolve. Her voice was very soft.

"You do not sleep well, do you, Owen Baarslag? Every terrible thing you have done to my people here in the swamps—the torture, the slavery, the subjection and the terror—it haunts your dreams. Your blighted conscience crawls, doesn't it, Owen?"

The sleeping man didn't answer. He was deep, deep down in the dark fastnesses of his nightmare, trying to escape, trying to awake.

Outside the synthetic shell of the hut, in the fetid heart of the Venusian swamp Sector 5, a serpent hissed as it raised its pointed head from the slime and sank back again. A gigantic flying Gruoon gurgled overhead as it fell on its prey and flapped upward into the thick mist. Beyond these more abrupt sounds was the unceasing dreeding of millions of insects and the loud croaking of the bloated albino tree-toads that sagged heavily from the five-hundred foot crinoids.

Now she looked with even greater intensity into his nightmare-twisted face, probed far behind the lids covering his black Tellurian eyes. The cold light from the captured still-living Shnug-fly which dangled from the low raftered ceiling molded a weird shadow on the walls of the tiny hut. Joha's red eyes blazed brighter, brighter still. Her slightly webbed hands gripped together with a tremendous tension of mental effort.

Owen Baarslag screamed. He sat up with a sudden heaving motion of agonized fear. His eyes were wide and horror-filled as he stared at the half breed creature beside him. Sweat streamed from his face made pallid by five years in the sunless swamp. His hands trembled over his bearded jaw.

"Stith!" he choked harshly. "Get me

Stith, quickly!" He raised an arm to strike her, but she weaved away. She brought him a box of the Stith tablets crystallized from the fermented juices of the Venusian aukweed. He tremblingly swallowed three of them. He got to his feet and stood there, shuddering, eyes wild with the memory of the terror-dream.

HE STARED at her for a long time from fear-glazed eyes while the fear gradually died into clouds of suspicion. He suspected her ability to probe his mind during sleep and implant the seeds of nightmare there, she knew that. But it was only an intangible suspicion. He needed her. She was his only companionship in the vast global rain-forest of Venus. And he wouldn't let the suspicion grow to the stage where he would have to kill her or worse. Her hold over him was a strong one. If he lost her, he would be alone.

To the Tellurian colonists scattered minutely through the rich area of Sector 5, Owen Baarslag was an unspeakable obscenity. A degenerate derelict; an abnormal who had "gone native" and things even more despicable. A Stith addict who eeked out a precarious existence in the most polluted occupation known: that of forcing the timid Venusian swamp natives to harvest the meager crops of aukweed from the lake bottoms. The vile drug brought fabulous credits when Baarslag managed to get it into the hands of secret agents on the space liners that docked at the Vencity space-port twice a year.

And the Venusians themselves hated Baarslag with a helpless cowed fear. He beat, tortured and killed them whenever they refused to obey. And the necessity of probing the great depths of the lakes after the aukweed twisted and deformed those it didn't kill, dooming them to a life of incurable pain.

Shaking as with dohl-fever, Owen staggered to the door, peering through the insect-proof netting into the writhing tendrils coming up from the phosphorescent bogs. He kicked Joha aside as though she were some crude form of vermin.

They considered him a despised abnormality, the authorities. There was a price on his head just the same, he mused

proudly. Five thousand credits for his capture—alive.

Dead, they wouldn't care for him particularly. His brain was abnormal in an age when advanced psychometry had made abnormality a rare exception. They needed his brain for analysis. Five thousand credits—that was the price they placed on his brain in the massive Chrome laboratories in Vencyty.

The labs in which his twin, Professor Albert Baarslag, held his exalted position as Chief of Psychometry!

The insidious influence of the euphoric stith burned into his mind, fogged his eye with delusions of grandeur. He saw himself as a martyr, a persecuted victim, sacrificed on the altars of socialization. He slumped down on the kuh-kuri couch again, and looked at the sinuous outline of the Venusian creature who took care of him as though love could exist between an Earthman and a half Venusian fish.

"I wasn't always what I am now," he said. "You know that, Joha!"

She nodded. Yes. She knew. She had heard various phases of Owen's life history many times. She liked to listen. The more she found out about his twisted past the more horrible she could make his nightmare by employing her powers of suggestion. That power was common among her people—she still considered herself a Venusian in spite of her Tellurian blood—but the fact that she was part Tellurian enabled her to exercise that power on the Earthman better than a pure blooded Venusian could. She knew that Owen had only a slight subconscious realization of that power which she possessed, and which she had been using for the past year to sow those insidious seeds of nightmare in Owen's mind.

To admit that she held such power over him was to admit that this green-skinned creature was superior to him—and that Owen Baarslag could never admit. No one was superior to Owen Baarslag. The whole world of science had been jealous and envious of him. That was why they had banned him, made an outlaw of him!

"I could have been the greatest cosmologist ever known," he said. "You know that, Joha!"

"Yes," she said in that strange slurred tongue that seemed to hold such emotion, yet held no tangible meaning. "I know that, Owen."

Owen's pale face that had been buried in the sunless mist clouded, darkened.

"My own brother," he said. "He betrayed me to the Scientific Council. Think of it, Joha! My own brother—my twin brother! Now it's time for him to die."

"You have found a way to kill him?" She backed away, eyes wide.

"Yes! And it is all perfect. Perfect. One would think Albert had prepared everything for my benefit, so that I might kill him. Everything is perfect. His experiment is finished. It is a great success. And he deserves to die. You know that, don't you, Joha? Don't you?"

"Yes. I know it," she said.

O WEN glared into the mist. "Fifteen years of study. My record was undeniably the highest in my study section. I might have graduated from World Tech this year, Joha! I might be in those Labs right now—instead of rotting here in the slime-pit! I took the final psychotic tests, weeks of mental probing with those damnable scanners digging into my brain. And Albert—my own twin brother—with his hypocritical love for me—he was the one who turned in the negative report! As Chief of the Psychometric Council he could have passed me. It was because he was my zygotic twin—because he knew me more intimately than even the scanners—that he was able to deny me entrance into the Labs! Now, Joha, doesn't he deserve to die?"

And Joha, who had heard this countless times before, made the customary reply. "Yes, Owen." And then added, "You have been waiting five years for him to perfect his Time-Encystment principle. This—suspended animation. You have said you would murder him, and take his place in the encystment chamber. But, Owen, are you sure you can escape detection long enough to get to him in order to kill him?"

"Yes, yes! It is all arranged. I can't fail. I must get to him. All these years of hell in this cesspool—they mustn't be wasted, Joha. They can't be wasted, can

they?"

"No," she said softly. "They can't be. But—but I love you so much, Owen. When you leave, I shall be so lonely. I will probably die of loneliness."

He laughed. It was a broken, bitter laugh. It was the laughter of a mad man. The paranoiac who is guided by a strange genius for planned destruction.

The laughter died, and he seemed to have forgotten her. He paced back and forth across the tiny damp hut. "Now. Now it is time. Five years in hell—then paradise. Albert has perfected his time-encystment chamber. He has insisted, bless him, on undergoing the experiment himself. He insists against the will of the Tellurian Government, the Council, everyone. He is noble. 'It would not be fair,' he says 'to allow another to take the chance. It is my experiment; and it is only right that I must be the guinea pig.' Ah, my brother is so noble, so fair, as are all hypocrites! How simple it is, Joha! I kill him. I become Professor Albert Baarslag. I enter the time-encystment chamber as my illustrious brother. I am put into a state of suspended animation. And I awake in five hundred years—a free man!"

Joha knelt down, a look of worship coloring the green of her half-human face. "You are so clever," she said. "So patient and so thorough, and so brave."

"Killing him, that is all that really matters," said Owen. "The encystment, that is only secondary. But it is ingenious, isn't it—to become the man I kill? There can be no punishment, no ridiculous retribution. Revenge is futile; in fact it isn't really revenge at all, if the avenger is made to suffer for his acts of vengeance."

Owen grasped Joha's slim arm, spun her around. His mouth twisted with cruel pleasure as he saw the slight painful writhing of her lips. "You may begin your slow death from loneliness now, Joha. I'm leaving for Vencity tonight."

She looked sadly resigned as she came close to him, slid one hand up and into the thick matting of his hair. "You need rest, Owen. You were out there two days in the swamp getting that last three kihs of awkward without sleep. You should rest well before you go into danger. You only slept

an hour."

He lay down with a long sigh. "Yes. That is a good idea. I'll need all my powers when I go to Vencity. But those—those horrible nightmares." His face drained, oozing sudden sweat at the memory. "Always the nightmare. The same one. But each time I dream, the nightmare gets more horrible! There must be some cause for it. If I could only find its cause. As soon as I assume Albert's identity, perhaps I can use the psychiatric scanner on myself and find the basic cause."

But her cool fingers stroking his brows sent him back into the sleep he dreaded. Immediately her hands withdrew. "No, Owen, the psychiatric scanner will never find the cause of this nightmare. It's artificially endowed, Owen, dear. It has no roots in your twisted childhood, or in your cruelty. And the scanner could never find its source. Because I am its source, and I am alien."

Her hands drew back from his face. Her eyes pierced brighter, brighter eating down down into the dregs, the dreary twisted depths of his mind.

HE WAS running, running as before, always as before. But this time his pursuers were very near. He was running in a sticky bog. With infinitely slow agony he drew each foot out of the slimy muck, sat it down, drew up the other foot. Around him was a thick blanket of cold clammy fog. And he knew it was an endless fog—that if he ran forever he could never escape it. But he also knew he wouldn't run forever, or even very long. His pursuers were too close.

His pursuers!

He looked back. A sense of profound horror sickened him. He recognized them now. For the first time they were near enough for him to identify them.

He sank down on his knees. He began to crawl through the stinking ooze. Then he felt their nearness. They were surrounding him. He couldn't escape. He saw a ring of cold green faces. Hands, innumerable hands, reached out, tickling him with a branch of small blue nettles.

He screamed. The poison fangs of the bombi-vine. The final agonies of the

damned. The bombi-vine! Death would be infinitely preferable to the sting of the bombi-vine. It was unendurable pain, indefinitely prolonged. It directly effected a mysterious distortion in the nervous structure. Science had no cure, had never found the cause. Men who stumbled onto the nettles of the bombi-vine sought a quick and merciful death as the only escape.

Without death, the victim lived out a full lifetime of raw, shrieking pain. . . .

His screams as he awoke silenced the giant tree-toads who hung heavily from the five-hundred foot crinoids. But before he left for Vencity through the darkness, he had suppressed the stark horror of the dream.

Once more he had drowned his hell in Stith.

HE CRAWLED out of the decrepit tractor, on the outskirts of Vencity. The city's lights glowed eerily through the night-thickened blanket of fog, as Owen found his way cautiously through rotting vegetation, then hesitated before entering Swamper Swhin's Dive. Tinny music came from the native band inside the smoky interior as it played the incomprehensible "music." A few Earthmen and women sat inside at the small oblong tables—tourists getting a morbid thrill from Venusian culture.

He slipped inside, around the shadowed wall and into a public audio-booth. He dialed the Vencity Laboratories. "Connect me with the Psychometric section, please. Urgent information for Chief Albert Baarslag."

"Who is calling?" the male secretary's voice said sleepily.

"Jonathon Graem, kelp farmer, Sector 5. I have highly interesting information revealing some unknown facts about psychological motivation of native swamper in my sector."

The male secretary hesitated.

"Professor Baarslag knows about me," Owen persisted. "I've submitted other discoveries of mine to him before. He told me to come back, and report any new discoveries to him immediately."

"Just a minute, sir. I'll connect your audio with Professor Baarslag's study."

He knew he would get results with that line about new psychological discoveries concerning native behavior patterns. Their mental processes were quite a mystery. Not a mystery to Owen any more. As far as he was concerned, they didn't have any mental processes at all.

Owen waited for Albert's voice. His twin still had a soft spot in his heart for him, he was pretty certain of that. A desperate appeal of the kind he intended to make would move his brother emotionally—get the sympathetic reaction he needed to complete his rather fantastic plan.

His brother's voice startled him. It was a perfect replica of his own. Soft, cultured and low. "Yes?"

"This is Owen."

He heard a catch, a pause from the other end of the audio.

"I—yes—why hello, Owen. Where are you? Wha—what do you want?"

Owen grinned coldly, but his voice was warm with repentant emotion. "Albert. I—I'm giving myself up. I've had enough. It's been a noble and futile life for me anyway. You know that it's always been just a matter of time before I would give myself up. Well, this is it. I'm—just outside the City now. At Swamper Swhin's Dive. But Albert—"

The Chief of Psychometry's voice was low, hoarse. "Yes, Owen."

"I want to see you first, Albert. I'll probably never get to see you again. I'll be a completely new personality when they release me from the reconditioning processes. I'd like to have a good talk with you before I turn myself in. Just a brother-to-brother talk, like old times, Albert. With me, it'll be a sort of cathartic, a confession. I've sinned, sinned terribly. I'd like to get it all out of my system, and you're the only one who might understand. Can I come up and see you tonight in your lab, Albert?"

There was a long pause. "Why—why, I guess so, Owen. Yes, yes of course you may."

Gullible fool, thought Owen.

"How can you get up here without being detected by the Scanner Guard?"

"I have the identification disks of Jonathon Graem. They'll pass the Scanner Guard. I—Jonathon Graem died in the

swamp two years ago."

"By accident," said Albert Baarslag pointedly.

"Naturally," said Owen with apparent sincerity, forgetting to add: "—after I pushed him into a bog and kept him there too long for his continued survival."

"Very well, Owen," said the Professor of Psychometry. Then, "I'm glad, Owen. So very glad that you're giving yourself up."

"I'll see you soon then," said Owen, and severed the audio connection.

THE automatic electronic Scanner Guard passed him freely as the swamper, Jonathon Graem. Professor Albert Baarslag was in his study, waiting. The rich luxuriance, the soothing harmonics radiating from the opaque walls—all rekindled the violent hatred Owen's paranoid mind felt for his twin.

Albert Baarslag might have been Owen, only his dress was different. His matted hair and beard were the same; Owen had been careful to keep that constant similarity as he waited for this moment when it would be time to act. A plastilex smock covered Albert, whereas Owen was dressed in the rubberoidalls of the swamp farmer.

Albert's face was tense with conflicting strain. His eyes were flooded with sympathetic emotion, and also with a disgust he could not conceal. Albert stretched out a firm hand. Owen ignored it. Albert frowned, then motioned to a chair. Owen kept on standing.

"Well," said Albert. "So you're repenting?"

"There's no use drawing out this obvious deception, Albert. I've been waiting for this opportunity. I'm here for revenge, Albert. To me, you are the most hated thing in the Universe. For the last five years I've been waiting only for this chance."

Albert's face became grey.

"Owen. Owen, listen. I did it for you. You're inherently unstable. A life in the labs would have broken you. Without perfect cortical-thalamic integration, no mind could stand six months in these Labs."

"Go on, Albert. Talk. That's what I'm here for. To watch you squirm."

"Listen to me, Owen! Whatever you do, you'll be apprehended. You can't escape. If you'll give yourself up, like you said you would do, I can see that you get special longevity treatment in my specialized Lunarian Clinics."

"It's too late for any ridiculous therapy," said Owen. "I know what happens in those Lunarian Clinics of yours. The result is called a cure, but the poor devils who are supposed to be cured aren't even the same personalities any more. Who wants to be a well-integrated but characterless non-entity?"

"No, Owen! You're not the extreme case that demands that kind of treatment. Only a slight lack of integration which can be leveled off—if you'll only—"

"That's enough," snapped Owen. "I have a cure, for both of us. A natural one, time-tested. It's as old as mankind." He revealed suddenly a small proton gun, issued to the swampers for survival against the carnivorous flora and fauna of Venus. He brought it out casually from inside the bib of his rubberoidalls, and directed it at Baarslag's chest. "Jonathon Graem's," said Owen with a stiff grin.

THE CHIEF of Psychometry staggered back from his chair, staring, eyes wet with fear and mental pain. "Not that, Owen—not from you—my—my twin."

"It is grotesque, isn't it?" said Owen. "I thought so too, when you did something perhaps worse to me. Now listen. I knew you'd finally persuade the Council and the Government to let you be the victim of your own experiment in suspended animation. I've been waiting for them to agree, and for a definite time to be set for the beginning of the time-encystment experiment. You see, Albert, I wouldn't kill you unless I knew there was a good chance to get away with it, as the old timers used to say. And I'm definitely assured of escape. Albert, I'm taking your place in the time-encystment chamber and I'm the one who's going to see the future you might have seen."

Albert Baarslag stared at his twin with incredulous horror. He no longer seemed to notice the gun. "Owen," he said faintly. "Owen. Listen to me. It won't work with

you. You're unintegrated. You—"

He finished the admonition with a long bubbling cry, and crumbled on the plastic mosaic of the floor. A bright, unreal-looking stream of blood flowed oilily from the blasted chest.

Owen leaned with a sudden awful weariness against the desk. He had wondered how it would feel to kill his twin. Now he knew. A strange mysterious fear filled his heart as he stood there in the silence looking down at the corpse. Somehow, the revenge wasn't so delectable as he had anticipated.

But after that Owen didn't waste any more time. First he dragged Albert's body into the small but expensively compact and complete laboratory just off Albert's office. He prepared a large vat which, thirty minutes after his twin's corpse was lowered into it, revealed only scant fluid evidence that Albert Baarslag had ever existed. No one would ever check because Owen was assuming his identity. The blood-stained clothes he also disposed of in a similar manner. He cleaned up the blood-stains on the floor with the immaculate care of his kind.

After that, dressed in Albert's clothes, no one could possibly have known that it was not really Albert Baarslag, but the hated, despised, obscenity known as Owen Baarslag, who sat behind his desk.

And it was the next afternoon that Professor Albert Baarslag was supposed to submit himself to the time-encystment experiments. The Professor, Owen Baarslag, was right on time as he dropped his gyrocar down on the vast roof-landing of the great Solar Museum which contained the deeply buried encystment chamber inside its massively thick and many-layered vault.

The teleo-electronic robot attendant wheeled the gyro onto an elevator while Owen, stifling a growing feeling of dusty desperation, dropped downward toward the deeply-buried rendezvous.

Professor Kaufman, one of the Chiefs from the Cosmology Section, greeted Owen with frank and open concern. From his earlier acquaintanceship with his brother, Owen knew that Kaufman had been Albert's closest associate. Others greeted Owen with formal, though terrific enthu-

siasm. This was one of the most dramatic experiments of the past five eras—eras which had been obsessed with social sciences and not sensational pastimes.

There weren't many there besides the Teleaudio Ethercast Representatives. They were busy broadcasting to Earth, Mars and the rest of Venus, the details of the experiment in suspended animation.

Owen was the center of the stage. The central actor in one of history's most sensational dramas. And it was being witnessed by a bigger audience than had ever been commanded by the greatest dramatist in solar history.

A soft-spoken interviewer from Solar Broadcasters questioned him. Owen's voice in his perfectly acted role was being broadcast and telescreened everywhere on Earth, Mars and Venus. For the benefit of the teleaudience, a microfilm was projecting a complete scientific explanation, while the smooth-voiced announcer read it aloud for those who demanded visual and audial transition.

And while the announcer explained for the fascinated audience, mostly laymen, Owen, two medics, and Kaufman, entered the many-doored thickness of the chamber, and into the very small interior where the encystment reservatory machine waited. To Owen, it resembled a streamlined coffin, barely large enough for his gaunt length . . . frightfully small, and confining.

The thick series of interlocking doors were still open and Owen could hear the announcer's voice:

"AND, as you perhaps already know, the principle of Professor Baarslag's time-encystment process involves phenomena we're all familiar with. The stasis developed by Professor Albert Baarslag, and to which in exactly fifteen minutes he will subject himself, incorporates a kind of super-sleep principle. The synaptic connections will be broken through amoeboid contraction—and this disconnection will exist until that future time, five hundred years hence, when Professor Baarslag will awaken. Five hundred years is only the opening experiment, says Professor Baarslag. The next experiment can possibly be for any definite period of time.

"This awakening is also interestingly arranged for by leaving one awaking threshold at its normal waking level. When this is activated by automatic relays—"

Owen was stripped now, and his body was outstretched in the soft, deep depths of the reservoir. The sliding panel that exposed his upper torso was slid open and he was looking up into Kaufman's red face, and the intent professional faces of the two medics. But Kaufman's face was serious now as he reached inside the reservoir and gripped Owen's damp hand.

"Goodby, Al," he said. "You're curious about man's destiny. I'm not. I wonder if you'll really be able to bear the knowledge of where we're going."

Owen's mouth was dry. He licked sticky lips. He didn't say anything.

They were preparing his arm for an injection of hypnotosin.

Owen twitched. He wanted to cry out his guilt. Surrender. He knew now that he had made a horrible mistake.

But things blurred fast. He couldn't speak. There was a dull, pleasant haze, a feeling of utter relaxation. Not utterly. It should be that way, but it wasn't.

Because he knew, now!

Voices came from a very far distance, slow, soft and rhythmical. After the anaesthesia, they would sink slender electrodes through the brain tissue of the cerebrum's third ventricle. Chemical reaction would destroy the substance of the electrodes gradually, a process of slow disintegration carefully gauged. And the lesions in the posterior region of the floor and walls of the third ventricle would heal, so that he might awaken—

Not! Anything would be better than this! He wanted to tell them. But he couldn't. It was too late. He was going under—deep down and far under.

He had been terribly misled by all the scientific jargon. Why couldn't they have been simple and direct? All this principle really was, was a complete mastery and understanding of the oldest phenomenon in man—the most common and the most persistent mystery.

Synapsis severed. Each cellular unit self-feeding through synthetic, inexhaustible

sources. Oxygen intake lowered to an incredibly low level. But it was really nothing other than—

SLEEP! Sleep! Pure, prolonged, unblemished, unsullied sleep!

And so . . .

Owen Baarslag was again running through the endless gray mist. His feet were again rising and falling with a terrifying, agonizing slowness from the thick, oozing bog.

He was down on his knees again, crawling with a futile frantic desperation. They ringed him in. He was trapped again. He saw the cordon of silent, emotionless green fishmen. Venusian native fishmen and in their hands reaching out, were branches of the bombi-vine!

He screamed. He kept on screaming as the nettles slashed his flesh with a burning hideous fire. It crept like molten liquid flame into his nerves, into his brain.

Unendurable pain, indefinitely prolonged. His only escape from the nightmare had been his ability to wake. But now he was doomed to go on sleeping, sleeping and dreaming and knowing the infinite, implacable pain—

—for five hundred years!

JOHA, who was part Venusian, dove easily and silently into the swamp lake. She swam to the other side and stood poised on the bank. She met them there. The green fish faces gazed at her with unblinking eyes and one of them said:

"It has been done, as you planned it, Joha?"

"It is done," she said softly. "For two years I prepared him for fulfillment of the dream. There is no escape for him now. The dream is planted too deeply. He will suffer torture greater than any he inflicted on our people. And he will suffer them for half a thousand of his years."

"Then your redemption is complete," said the little green fishman. "What you have done entitles you to enter our tribe again. Even though you are part Tellurian, you are again considered one of us. Come, my daughter. Shall we go back?"

Joha dropped down, bowed her head twice before him. "I am ready," she said.

Let The Ants Try

By JAMES MacCREIGH

He filled his lungs for one last scream.



Dr. Salva Gordy looked at the radioactive smear that had been Detroit. Then he looked down at the boiling anthill. Why not, he thought excitedly, why not? . . .

GORDY SURVIVED THE Three-Hour War, even though Detroit didn't; he was on his way to Washington, with his blueprints and models in his bag, when the bombs struck.

He had left his wife behind in the city, and not even a trace of her body was ever found. The children, of course, weren't as lucky as that. Their summer camp was less than twenty miles away, and unfortunately in the direction of the prevailing wind. But they were not in any pain until the last few days of the month they had left to live. Gordy managed to fight his

way back through the snarled, frantic airline controls to them. Even though he knew they would certainly die of radiation sickness, and they suspected it, there was still a whole blessed week of companionship before the pain got too bad.

That was about all the companionship Gordy had for the whole year of 1960.

He came back to Detroit, as soon as the radioactivity had died down; he had nowhere else to go. He found a house on the outskirts of the city, and tried to locate someone to buy it from. But the Emergency Administration laughed at him.

"Move in, if you're crazy enough to stay."

When Gordy thought about it all, it occurred to him that he was in a sort of state of shock. His fine, trained mind almost stopped functioning. He ate and slept, and when it grew cold he shivered and built fires, and that was all. The War Department wrote him two or three times, and finally a government man came around to ask what had happened to the things that Gordy had promised to bring to Washington. But he looked queerly at the pink, hairless mice that fed unmolested in the filthy kitchen, and he stood a careful distance away from Gordy's hairy face and torn clothes.

He said, "The Secretary sent me here, Mr. Gordy. He takes a personal interest in your discovery."

Gordy shook his head. "The Secretary is dead," he said. "They were all killed when Washington went."

"There's a new Secretary," the man explained. He puffed on his cigarette and tossed it into the patch Gordy was scrabbling into a truck garden. "Arnold Cavanagh. He knows a great deal about you, and he told me, 'If Salva Gordy has a weapon, we must have it. Our strength has been shattered. Tell Gordy we need his help.'"

Gordy crossed his hands like a lean Buddha.

"I haven't got a weapon," he said.

"You have something that can be used as a weapon. You wrote to Washington, before the War came, and said——"

"The War is over," said Salva Gordy. The government man sighed, and tried again, but in the end he went away. He never came back. The thing, Gordy thought, was undoubtedly written off as a crackpot idea after the man made his report; it was exactly that kind of a discovery, anyhow.

IT was May when John de Terry appeared. Gordy was spading his garden. "Give me something to eat," said the voice behind Gordy's back.

Salva Gordy turned around and saw the small, dirty man who spoke. He rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. "You'll have to work for it," he said.

"All right." The newcomer set down his pack. "My name is John de Terry. I used to live here in Detroit."

Salva Gordy said, "So did I."

Gordy fed the man, and accepted a cigarette from him after they had eaten. The first puffs made him light-headed—it had been that long since he'd smoked—and through the smoke he looked at John de Terry amiably enough. Company would be all right, he thought. The pink mice had been company, of a sort—but it turned out that the mutation that made them hairless had also given them an appetite for meat. And after the morning when he had awakened to find tiny toothmarks in his leg, he'd had to destroy them. And there had been no other animal since, nothing but the ants.

"Are you going to stay?" Gordy asked.

De Terry said, "If I can. What's your name?" When Gordy told him, some of the animal look went out of his eyes, and wonder took its place. "Doctor Salva Gordy?" he asked. "Mathematics and physics in Pasadena?"

"Yes, I used to teach at Pasadena."

"And I studied there." John de Terry rubbed absently at his ruined clothes. "That was a long time ago. You didn't know me; I majored in biology. But I knew you."

Gordy stood up and carefully put out the stub of his cigarette. "It was too long ago," he said. "I hardly remember. Shall we work in the garden now?"

Together they sweated in the spring sunlight that afternoon, and Gordy discovered that what had been hard work for one man went quickly enough for two. They worked clear to the edge of the plot before the sun reached the horizon. John de Terry stopped and leaned on his spade, panting.

He gestured to the rank growth beyond Gordy's patch. "We can make a bigger garden," he said. "Clear out that truck, and plant more food. We might even——" He stopped. Gordy was shaking his head.

"You can't clear it out," said Gordy. "It's rank stuff, a sort of crabgrass with a particularly tough root. I can't even cut it. It's all around here, and it's spreading."

De Terry grimaced. "Mutation?"

"I think so. And look." Gordy beckoned to the other man and led him to the very edge of the cleared area. He bent down, picked up something red and wriggling between his thumb and forefinger.

De Terry took it from his hand. "Another mutation?" He brought the thing close to his eyes. "It's almost like an ant," he said. "Except—well, the thorax is all wrong. And it's soft-bodied." He fell silent, examining the thing.

He said something under his breath, and threw the insect from him. "You wouldn't have a microscope, I suppose? No—and yet, that thing is hard to believe. It's an ant, but it doesn't seem to have a tracheal breathing system at all. It's something different."

"Everything's different," Gordy said. He pointed to a couple of abandoned rows. "I had carrots there. At least, I thought they were carrots; when I tried to eat them they made me sick." He sighed heavily. "Humanity has had its chance, John," he said. "The atomic bomb wasn't enough; we had to turn everything into a weapon. Even I, I made a weapon out of something that had nothing to do with war. And our weapons have blown up in our faces."

De Terry grinned. "Maybe the ants will do better. It's their turn now."

"I wish it were." Gordy stirred earth over the boiling entrance to an anthole and watched the insects in their consternation. "They're too small, I'm afraid."

"Why, no. These ants are different, Dr. Gordy. Insects have always been small because their breathing system is so poor. But these are mutated. I think—I think they actually have lungs. They could grow, Dr. Gordy. And if ants were the size of men . . . they'd rule the world."

"Lunged ants!" Gordy's eyes gleamed. "Perhaps they will rule the world, John. Perhaps when the human race finally blows itself up once and for all . . ."

De Terry shook his head, and looked down again at his tattered, filthy clothes. "The next blow-up is the last blow-up," he said. "The ants come too late, by millions and millions of years."

He picked up his spade. "I'm hungry again, Dr. Gordy," he said.

They went back to the house and, without conversation, they ate. Gordy was preoccupied, and de Terry was too new in the household to force him to talk.

It was sundown when they had finished, and Gordy moved slowly to light a lamp. Then he stopped.

"It's your first night, John," he said. "Come down cellar. We'll start the generator and have real electric lights in your honor."

De Terry followed the older man down a flight of stairs, groping in the dark. By candlelight they worked over a gasoline generator; it was stiff from disuse, but once it started it ran cleanly. "I salvaged it from my own," Gordy explained. "The generator—and that."

He swept an arm toward a corner of the basement. "I told you I invented a weapon," he added. "That's it."

De Terry looked. It was as much like a cage as anything, he thought—the height of a man and almost cubical. "What does it do?" he asked.

For the first time in months, Salva Gordy smiled. "I can't tell you in English," he said. "And I doubt that you speak mathematics. The closest I can come is to say that it displaces temporal co-ordinates. Is that gibberish?"

"It is," said de Terry. "What does it do?"

"Well, the War Department had a name for it—a name they borrowed from H.G. Wells. They called it a Time Machine." He met de Terry's shocked, bewildered stare calmly. "A time machine," he repeated. "You see, John, we can give the ants a chance after all, if you like."

FOURTEEN hours later they stepped into the cage, its batteries charged again and its strange motor whining . . .

And, forty million years earlier, they stepped out onto quaking humid soil.

Gordy felt himself trembling, and with an effort managed to stop. "No dinosaurs or saber-toothed tigers in sight," he reported.

"Not for a long time yet," de Terry agreed. Then, "My Lord!"

He looked around him with his mouth open wide. There was no wind, and the air was warm and wet. Large trees were clustered quite thickly around them—or what looked like trees; de Terry decided they were rather some sort of soft-stemmed ferns or fungi. Overhead was deep cloud.

Gordy shivered. "Give me the ants," he ordered.

Silently de Terry handed them over. Gordy poked a hole in the soft earth with his finger and carefully tilted the flask, dropped one of the ant queens he had unearthed in the back yard. From her belly hung a slimy mass of eggs. A few yards away—it should have been farther, he thought, but he was afraid to get too far from de Terry and the machine—he made another hole and repeated the process.

There were eight queens. When the eighth was buried he flung the bottle away and came back to de Terry.

"That's it," he said.

De Terry exhaled. His solemn face cracked in a sudden embarrassed smile. "I—I guess I feel like God," he said. "Good lord, Dr. Gordy! Talk about your great moments in history—this is all of them! I've been thinking about it, and the only event I can remember that measures up is the Flood. Not even that. We've created a race!"

"If they survive, we have." Gordy wiped a drop of condensed moisture off the side of his time machine and puffed. "I wonder how they'll get along with mankind," he said.

They were silent for a moment, considering. From somewhere in the fern jungle came a raucous animal cry. Both men looked up in quick apprehension, but moments passed and the animal did not appear.

Finally de Terry said, "Maybe we'd better go back."

"All right." Stiffly they climbed into the closet-sized interior of the time machine.

Gordy stood with his hand on the control wheel, thinking about the ants. Assuming that they survived—assuming that in 40,000,000 years they grew larger and

developed brains—what would happen? Would men be able to live in peace with them? Would it—might it not make men brothers, joined against an alien race?

Might this thing prevent human war, and—his thoughts took an insane leap—could it have prevented the war that destroyed Gordy's family!

Beside him, de Terry stirred restlessly. Gordy jumped, and turned the wheel, and was in the dark mathematical vortex which might have been a fourth dimension.

THEY stopped the machine in the middle of a city, but the city was not Detroit. It was not a human city at all.

The machine was at rest in a narrow street, half blocking it. Around them towered conical metal structures, some of them a hundred feet high. There were vehicles moving in the street, one coming toward them and stopping.

"Dr. Gordy!" de Terry whispered. "Do you see them?"

Salva Gordy swallowed. "I see them," he said.

He stepped out of the time machine and stood waiting to greet the race to which he had given life.

For these were the children of ants in the three-wheeled vehicle. Behind a transparent windshield he could see them clearly.

De Terry was standing close behind him now, and Gordy could feel the younger man's body shaking. "They're ugly things." Gordy said mildly.

"Ugly! They're filthy!"

The antlike creatures were as big as a man, but hard-looking and as obnoxious as blackbeetles. Their eyes, Gordy saw with surprise, had mutated more than their bodies. For, instead of faceted insect eyes, they possessed iris, cornea and pupil,—not round, or vertical like a cat's eyes, or horizontal like a horse's eyes, but irregular and blotchy. But they seemed like vertebrate's eyes, and they were strange and unnatural in the parchment blackness of an ant's bulged head.

Gordy stepped forward, and simultaneously the ants came out of their vehicle. For a moment they faced each other, the humans and the ants, silently.

"What do I do now?" Gordy asked de Terry over his shoulder.

De Terry laughed—or gasped. Gordy wasn't sure. "Talk to them," he said. "What else is there to do?"

Gordy swallowed. He resolutely did not attempt to speak in English to these creatures, knowing as surely as he knew his name that English—and probably any other language involving sound—would be incomprehensible to them. But he found himself smiling pacifically to them, and that was of course as bad . . . the things had no expressions of their own, that he could see, and certainly they would have no precedent to help interpret a human smile.

Gordy raised his hand in the semantically sound gesture of peace, and waited to see what the insects would do.

They did nothing.

Gordy bit his lip and, feeling idiotic, bowed stiffly to the ants.

THE ants did nothing. De Terry said from behind, "Try talking to them, Dr. Gordy."

"That's silly," Gordy said. "They can't hear." But it was no sillier than anything else. Irritably, but making the words very clear, he said, "We . . . are . . . friends."

The ants did nothing. They just stood there, with the unwinking pupiled eyes fixed on Gordy. They didn't shift from foot to foot as a human might, or scratch themselves, or even show the small movement of human breathing. They just stood there.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said de Terry. "Here let me try."

He stepped in front of Gordy and faced the ant-things. He pointed to himself. "I am human," he said. "Mammalian." He pointed to the ants. "You are insects. That—" he pointed to the time machine—"took us to the past, where we made it possible for you to exist." He waited for reaction, but there wasn't any. De Terry clicked his tongue and began again. He pointed to the tapering metal structures. "This is your city," he said.

Gordy, listening to him, felt the hopelessness of the effort. Something disturbed the thin hairs at the back of his skull, and

he reached absently to smooth them down. His hand encountered something hard and inanimate—not cold, but, like spongy wood, without temperature at all. He turned around. Behind them were half a dozen larger ants. Drones, he thought—or did ants have drones? "John," he said softly . . . and the inefficient, fragile-looking pincer that had touched him clamped his shoulder. There was no strength to it, he thought at once. Until he moved, instinctively, to get away, and then a thousand sharp serrations slipped through the cloth of his coat and into the skin. It was like catching oneself on a cluster of tiny fishhooks. He shouted, "John! Watch out!"

De Terry, bending low for the purpose of pointing at the caterpillar treads of the ant vehicle, straightened up, startled. He turned to run, and was caught in a step. Gordy heard him yell, but Gordy had troubles of his own and could spare no further attention for de Terry.

When two of the ants had him, Gordy stopped struggling. He felt warm blood roll down his arm, and the pain was like being flayed. From where he hung between the ants, he could see the first two, still standing before their vehicle, still motionless.

There was a sour reek in his nostrils, and he traced it to the ants that held him, and wondered if he smelled as bad to them. The two smaller ants abruptly stirred and moved forward rapidly on eight thin legs to the time machine. Gordy's captors turned and followed them, and for the first time since the scuffle he saw de Terry. The younger man was hanging limp from the lifted forelegs of a single ant, with two more standing guard beside. There was pulsing blood from a wound on de Terry's neck. Unconscious, Gordy thought mechanically, and turned his head to watch the ants at the machine.

It was a disappointing sight. They merely stood there, and no one moved. Then Gordy heard de Terry grunt and swear weakly. "How are you, John?" he called.

De Terry grimaced. "Not very good. What happened?"

Gordy shook his head, and sought for

words to answer. But the two ants turned in unison from the time machine and glided toward de Terry, and Gordy's words died in his throat. Delicately one of them extended a foreleg to touch de Terry's chest.

Gordy saw it coming. "John!" he shrieked—and then it was all over, and de Terry's scream was harsh in his ear and he turned his head away. Dimly from the corner of his eye he could see the sawlike claws moving up and down, but there was no life left in Terry to protest.

SALVA GORDY sat against a wall and looked at the ants who were looking at him. If it hadn't been for that which was done to de Terry, he thought, there would really be nothing to complain about.

It was true that the ants had given him none of the comforts that humanity lavishes on even its criminals . . . but they had fed him, and allowed him to sleep—when it suited their convenience, of course—and there were small signs that they were interested in his comfort, in their fashion. When the pulpy mush they first offered him came up thirty minutes later, his multi-legged hosts brought him a variety of foods, of which he was able to swallow some fairly palatable fruits. He was housed in a warm room. And, if it had neither chairs or windows, Gordy thought, that was only because ants had no use for these themselves. And he couldn't ask for them.

That was the big drawback, he thought. That . . . and the memory of John de Terry.

He squirmed on the hard floor until his shoulder-blades found a new spot to prop themselves against, and stared again at the committee of ants who had come to see him.

They were working an angular thing that looked like a camera—at least, it had a glittering something that might be a lens. Gordy stared into it sullenly. The sour reek was in his nostrils again . . .

Gordy admitted to himself that things hadn't worked out just as he had planned. Deep under the surface of his mind—just now beginning to come out where he could see it—there had been a furtive hope. He

had hoped that the rise of the ants, with the help he had given them, would aid and speed the rise of mankind. For hatred, Gordy knew, started in the recoil from things that were different. A man's first enemy is his family—for he sees them first—but he sides with them against the families across the way. And still his neighbors are allies against the Ghettos and Harlems of his town—and his town to him is the heart of the nation—and his nation commands life and death in war.

For Gordy, there had been a buried hope that a separate race would make a whipping-boy for the passions of humanity. And that, if there were struggle, it would not be between man and man, but between the humans . . . and the ants.

There had been this buried hope, but the hope was denied. For the ants simply had not allowed man to rise.

The ants put up their camera-like machine, and Gordy looked up in expectation. Half a dozen of them left, and two stayed on. One was the smallish creature with a bangle on the foreleg which seemed to be his personal jailer; the other a stranger to Gordy, as far as he could tell.

The two ants stood motionless for a period of time that Gordy found tedious. He changed his position, and lay on the floor, and thought of sleeping. But sleep would not come. There was no evading the knowledge that he had wiped out his own race—annihilated them by preventing them from birth, forty million years before his own time. He was like no other murderer since Cain, Gordy thought, and wondered that he felt no blood on his hands.

There was a signal that he could not perceive, and his guardian ant came forward to him, nudged him outward from the wall. He moved as he was directed—out the low exit-hole (he had to navigate it on hands and knees) and down a corridor to the bright day outside.

The light set Gordy blinking. Half blind, he followed the bangled ant across a square to a conical shed. More ants were waiting there, circled around a litter of metal parts.

Gordy recognized them at once. It was his time machine, stripped piece by piece.

After a moment the ant nudged him

again, impatiently, and Gordy understood what they wanted. They had taken the machine apart for study, and they wanted it put together again.

Pleased with the prospect of something to do with his fingers and his brain, Gordy grinned and reached for the curious ant-made tools . . .

He ate four times, and slept once, never moving from the neighborhood of the cone-shaped shed. And then he was finished.

Gordy stepped back. "It's all yours," he said proudly. "It'll take you anywhere. A present from humanity to you."

The ants were very silent. Gordy looked at them and saw that there were drone-ants in the group, all still as statues.

"Hey!" he said in startlement, unthinking. And then the needle-jawed ant claw took him from behind.

Gordy had a moment of nausea—and then terror and hatred swept it away.

Heedless of the needles that laced his skin, he struggled and kicked against the creatures that held him. One arm came free, leaving gobbets of flesh behind, and his heavy shod foot plunged into a pulpy eye. The ant made a whistling, gasping sound and stood erect on four hairy legs.

Gordy felt himself jerked a dozen feet into the air, then flung free in the wild, silent agony of the ant. He crashed into the ground, cowering away from the staggering monster. Sobbing, he pushed himself to his feet; the machine was behind him; he turned and blundered into it a step ahead of the other ants, and spun the wheel.

A HOLLOW insect leg, detached from the ant that had been closest to him, was flopping about on the floor of the machine; it had been that close.

Gordy stopped the machine where it had started, on the same quivering, primordial bog, and lay crouched over the controls for a long time before he moved.

He had made a mistake, he and de Terry; there weren't any doubts left at all. And there was . . . there *might* be a way to right it.

He looked out at the Coal Measure forest. The fern trees were not the fern trees he had seen before; the machine had been moved in space. But the time, he knew was identically the same; trust the machine for that. He thought: I gave the world to the ants, right here. I can take it back. I can find the ants I buried and crush them underfoot . . . or intercept myself before I bury them . . .

He got out of the machine, suddenly panicky. Urgency squinted his eyes as he peered around him.

Death had been very close in the ant city; the reaction still left Gordy limp. And was he safe here? He remembered the violent animal scream he had heard before, and shuddered at the thought of furnishing a casual meal to some dinosaur . . . while the ant queens lived safely to produce their horrid young.

A gleam of metal through the fern trees made his heart leap. Burnished metal here could mean but one thing—the machine!

Around a clump of fern trees, their bases covered with thick club mosses, he ran, and saw the machine ahead. He raced toward it—then came to a sudden stop, slipping on the damp ground.

For there were *two* machines in sight.

The farther machine was his own, and through the screening mosses he could see two figures standing in it, his own and de Terry's.

But the nearer was a larger machine, and a strange design.

And from it came a hastening mob—not a mob of men, but of black insect shapes racing toward him.

Of course, thought Gordy, as he turned hopelessly to run—of course, the ants had infinite time to work in. Time enough to build a machine after the pattern of his own—and time to realize what they had to do to him, to insure their own race safety.

Gordy stumbled, and the first of the black things was upon him.

As his panicky lungs filled with air for the last time, Gordy knew what animal had screamed in the depths of the Coal Measure forest.



He drove her down like a blazing meteor.

SWORD OF FIRE

By EMMETT McDOWELL

Jupiter Jones, naked and helpless in the slime of that vile world, cursed the space warp that had flung him down among its groveling mutants. For their rising, excited whispers proclaimed him a knight in shining armor—the bright weapon in his hands their only hope against the terrible octopods!

THE MIZAR, a glittering needle with stubby, backswept wings, hurtled out of deep space, arced into orbital flight a thousand kilometers above the surface of the planet. The starship had approached from the night side. Now, as it decelerated rapidly, it flashed into the raw orange daylight of the planet's K1 type sun, angled downward into the stratosphere.

Inside the Mizar's control blister, Jupiter Jones lifted red-rimmed eyes to the fuel

gauge. It showed only a few centigrams left. Little more than enough to land.

He swore under his breath, hunched lower over the controls, a long, loose-framed man with a shock of red hair and vivid green eyes. The olive uniform of the Galactic Colonization Board was wrinkled as if it had been slept in, and he had allowed his beard to grow. The bushy orange-red mass of it hid his face almost to the eyes.

He was alone in the ship. He'd been



alone, operating the Mizar single-handed since Briggs, his co-pilot, had gone crazy and killed himself.

It had been a damned inconsiderate thing for Briggs to do, Jones felt. Not that he could altogether blame the co-pilot.

They had blundered into a space warp beyond Alpha Centaurus. The Mizar had been flung into an uncharted region of the cosmos, hundreds, perhaps thousands of parsecs from Sol. Hopelessly lost, the chance of ever finding their way back to

Earth had been slimmer than trying to locate one certain atom of oxygen in Earth's envelope of air. Briggs had cracked under the strain.

When the co-pilot had failed to relieve him at the end of his watch, Jupiter Jones had switched the controls over to "George," the robot pilot, and had gone in search of him. He'd found Briggs dead in his bunk. An analysis of his stomach had revealed that he'd taken cyanide. There had been no note. Nothing.

He had recorded the tragedy in the log along with a biting opinion of the Psychiatric Board for allowing a man with a flaw in his psychosis to be assigned to advance exploration. Then he'd heaved the body out the refuse port.

Well, he was still lost, Jupiter Jones reflected savagely. Fortunately though, he'd discovered this huge K1 type sun with its system of seven planets while he still had fuel enough to reach it.

Spectroscopic observations had revealed that the second planet possessed an atmosphere high in oxygen and showing traces of water vapor. It was a small world about the size of Mars and uncomfortably close to its flaming orange sun, but it had been his only bet.

He glanced obliquely at the fuel gauge again. His lips thinned, and he dropped his eyes to the scanner.

Immediately, the surface seemed to bounce up at him. Dense jungles. The sheen of an inland sea. The terrain flowed past like an immense relief map.

Then he saw the city.

IT ROSE at the edge of the sea, all turrets and spires and battlements like a walled medieval town. He caught a glimpse of quays with ships warped against them, of cultivated fields like a vast checkerboard. Then the Mizar had flashed past. The city seemed to dwindle and vanish, only the sparkle of orange sunlight on the spires lingering an instant longer.

Jupiter Jones blew out his breath. His first reaction had been to swing the Mizar around, but caution prevailed. He was too old a hand at Galactic exploration to burst unannounced on an alien culture.

The terrain below had been growing progressively rougher. Just ahead a range of mountains reared saw-edged peaks into the clouds. He nursed the Mizar along until the gorges fell away beneath him like blue-green troughs. There was no sign of habitation anywhere.

He braked and banked, spiraling lower and lower, dropping into a deep valley with a river cutting through it like a silver thread. At the last moment, he frantically buckled himself down and cut in "George".

Flame bellowed around the Mizar as the

automatic landing jets burst into life. With a fierce crackling roar the star ship sliced through the tangled vegetation, came to rest a hundred meters from the river.

Jupiter Jones threw off the safety straps, stood up, feeling a tingle of excitement take hold of him.

He was down, the ship resting on the crust of a strange world. A world that might well be his home for the rest of his natural life.

It was a dismaying thought.

With gravity dragging at his feet once more, he moved to the transparent rind of the thermoplas blister and stared out.

The landing jets had charred a huge swathe in the vegetation, charred it to the finest ash and baked the ground like brick, leaving a wall of jungle hemming the ship in.

Nothing moved.

He flicked on the outside amplifiers, but the silence was tomb-like. The thunder of his descent must have frightened off all the wild life.

He was conscious of a cumulative weariness like an ache. Experience had taught him the necessity of being fresh before venturing into an alien environment. He entered his landing in the log, switched on the electronic alarm.

"Let 'George' keep watch," he thought. "George's" senses were keener than any human's, and "George" could be depended on!

With a last glance at the dark mass of jungle, he climbed down the ladder to the cabin, flung himself into his bunk.

He was awakened by the wild ringing of the alarm bell.

JUPITER JONES sprang from his bunk. It seemed as if his head had barely touched the pillow; but as he yanked himself through the well to the control blister above, he saw that night had fallen.

The bluish pallor of the riding lights illuminated the instruments. Through the skin of the blister, he could see the black vault of the heavens sparkling with unfamiliar constellations. But that was all. The Mizar, itself, seemed to be lying in a vale of tar-like darkness.

The clamor of the bell never abated.

It drowned out any sound that might be coming through the amplifiers.

He shut it off. As the ringing fell silent, he could hear coughing grunts. The hair on the nape of his neck rose like the hackles of a dog and he switched on the floodlights.

Instantly the burn blazed with a fierce white illumination. He caught a glimpse of a dozen startled figures at the edge of the jungle!

They were human—in shape at least—tall, kilted men with long red hair and copper colored features. Blinded by the light they stood in postures of frozen surprise.

Staring out from the darkened blister, Jupiter Jones thought he'd never seen such feral savagery as was reflected in their expressions. Like—like mad wolves! They were armed with bows. Swords dangled from harness over their backs. Two of them carried a litter.

A frown clouded Jupiter's face.

The litter-bearers belonged to a different race. They were squat, naked, powerful brutes, their slick hides tinged a greenish cast. But it wasn't altogether that. The pair had a passive, resigned look like oxen.

Like the beasts of burden they appeared to be, he thought. Probably a slave race. Then his whole attention was focused on the fantastic creature in the litter.

It was no bigger than a large monkey. Eight spidery arms sprouted from its grotesque body which was covered with a glittering purple shell like a huge mollusk. Jupiter Jones noted these details amost before the creatures recovered from their surprise at the blinding light. His first impression of the purple-shelled octopod in the litter had been that it must be a captive.

Then the octopod raised a silver tube to an orifice in its head, blew a single, piercing note.

The two slate-green porters wheeled and bore the thing off into the jungle. The half dozen naked, copper-skinned warriors followed hard on their heels for all the world like a pack of fox hounds.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Lord, he thought; what was that thing?

Could it have been the dominant life form?

He switched out the floodlights, reset the alarm. His first exultation at finding a habitable and inhabited world began to give way to a gnawing distrust.

Suddenly the darkness appeared malignant, concealing hosts of savage brute-men, unguessable horrors. There was the feel of movement out there. He heard something grunt and thrash in the underbrush followed by a squealing noise like a stuck pig.

He shivered, glanced at the photo-electric chronometer.

The sun had set at nine hours, Earth time, he saw. It was fifteen o'clock now. He had ascertained the rotation of the planet while still out in space and knew it wouldn't be light for three hours yet.

He set himself to the task that had occupied him during every leisure moment since the warp had hurled the Mizar beyond the known regions of space—charting the stars in an effort to locate himself.

But he couldn't concentrate. He kept listening subconsciously for any untoward sound of the world outside.

HIS real name was Jones RV860-09-34271. The Jupiter had been pinned on because he had been marooned once on that planet for three months and had lived to tell about it.

There were two things which Jupiter especially didn't like. He didn't like men; and he didn't like women.

He prided himself on being self-sufficient and tough—and he was tough, morally tough, and physically and intellectually tough. He had grown up in the stews of Venusport, fending for himself since the age of nine. Because he'd never seen the stars, he'd had one consuming ambition—to go to space.

He had studied, worked and fought his way through the Galactic Colonization Board's Institute of Technology. The Institute was a hard school. The men of the advance exploratory units, the special corpsmen, had to be well versed in all sciences from astro-physics to zoomorphology.

No one had believed that Jupiter could make it. Briggs, who had been an upper

classman, had ridden him unmercifully. All of which had merely crystallized his determination. In the end he'd graduated with top honors.

It was the same sort of determination that sustained him at this moment.

Jupiter had long since reached the dismaying conclusion that the Mizar had been swept entirely beyond the local system, even beyond any of the adjacent star clusters. That was the final straw that had caused Briggs to crack.

At thought of Briggs, Jupiter Jones spat into the waste chute and arranged his lank frame before the powerful electronic telescope with which all the ships of advance exploration were equipped. But he didn't use it right away. Instead, he gazed upward at the star-encrusted heavens.

The milky way, he saw, began down near the horizon, though it climbed less than a third of the way up into the sky. The rest of that tremendous path was blotted out by an inky blackness.

He tugged at his beard. There was something familiar about that black pall, and he turned to the star charts again.

Sure enough the "rift", a dark nebula, split the milky way from the constellations of Centaurus to Cygnus!

He must be very close to it, perhaps within a few light years, for it to blot out so much of the super galaxy. But was it the same one? There were hundreds of these dark nebulae. And even if it was, on what side of it was he in relation to Earth?

His elation slowly ebbed.

Pulling out his notes, he recommenced the endless task of mapping the universe. He kept hard at it until the giant orange sun had suffused the sky with a saffron light, blotting out the stars.

The Mizar was only one of many such units probing the local star system in search of habitable worlds. Their role in the long Galactic Colonization plan was to make a superficial examination: vegetation, atmosphere, dominant life form if any and report their findings. Later, depending on the reports of these advance units, the real exploration by staffs of specialists commenced.

Although Jupiter was sure the planet

was too many light years off ever to be colonized, he entered the composition of the air in the log from force of habit.

He broke out the emergency pack, selected a semi-automatic carbine from the Mizar's arsenal. He added electroscope, geiger counter, ultra violet ray lamp and prospecting tools to the load. If he ever were to lift the Mizar from the surface again, he must find a deposit of uranium or thorium bearing minerals.

Then he shaved off his great red beard, revealing a hard face, bold featured with a wide, thin-lipped mouth. He slung the load to his shoulders, opened the main port.

A strong saffron sunlight beat into his eyes as he let himself to the ground. He stood still a moment, feeling the dirt press against the soles of his feet, examining the blank hostile wall of jungle, tasting the moist warm air.

Bird-like creatures flitted through the foliage. The vegetation looked mesozoic with its great pulpy stems and fern-like fronds. One of the bird things sailed overhead. It was apple green and appeared as if it might be some freakish symbiosis of plant and animal.

Damn Briggs, he thought for the hundredth time. It was suicidal to attempt the exploration of a strange world alone!

II

JUPITER STARTED CAUTIOUSLY for the river, his feet kicking up little puffs of the powdery ash left by the jets. When he reached the jungle, he halted again, unpleasant memories of the cannibal plants of Sirius III in the back of his mind. Then, setting his jaw, he forged ahead.

It was hot and green in the jungle. Sweat coursed down his face, plastered his tunic to his back.

He had gone less than thirty meters when he broke into a well traveled trail paralleling the river.

Jupiter Jones' nostrils flared. He came to an abrupt halt. Although he wasn't yet thirty-five, he was known as an old man in the special corps. He had survived partly because of an instinct of danger that was almost psychic.

He sensed it now in the sudden dryness of his mouth, the hammering of his heart as his adrenal glands surcharged his blood. Then away in the distance, he heard the winding of a horn!

At least, it sounded like a horn. His hands tightened about the carbine and he held his breath. But though he listened for some time, the sound wasn't repeated.

Gradually, the valley narrowed. Tall cliffs towered above him like the jaws of a vise. He had gone about five miles, the limit he had set himself for the first day, when he caught the sound of splashing mingled with laughter.

He stopped in midstride, his nerves atingle. The sounds went on punctuated by giggling screams. He slid the safety off the carbine, crept forward.

A hundred meters upstream the jungle on the opposite bank gave way to meadows that swelled up to meet the talus at the foot of a towering thousand foot cliff.

Where the meadow dipped down to the stream there was a little gravel beach, and a band of women and children were splashing in the shallow water.

Jupiter stood stock still, peering out from the forest like a tiger.

The women were tall, brown skinned, their hair wet and glistening like seals. Naked children squealed and played among the pebbles of the beach.

His glance strayed beyond them to the cliffs, which were pitted by cave mouths, broken by ledges. He could distinguish the figures of men and women in breechclouts and skins clinging to the face of the rock like flies.

These people had neither the brutish look of the green skinned slaves he'd seen last night, nor yet the ferocity of the warriors. He felt the hot sluggish breeze shift, blowing from him towards the bathers.

Instantly, the women were thrown into a panic. Those with children snatched them up, and the whole pack broke from the water, fled screaming towards the cliffs!

Jupiter Jones narrowed his eyes in alarm. Their sense of smell must be keen as a hound's! He could see the males leaping down the cliffs, brandishing clubs. It reminded him of a disturbed colony of

baboons he'd seen once. Gad, but he'd stirred up a hornet's nest! He began to back warily from the river bank.

THERE was a grunt behind him; a branch snapped. He tried to whirl around, bringing up his carbine. A pair of arms wrapped around him, seized him in a crushing grip!

Shock closed Jupiter's throat. He twisted, wrenched frantically.

The arms tightened like steel cables. There were more grunts, triumphant shouts, the crashing of underbrush.

Across the river the caveman had come to a halt. Then suddenly he saw them turn and flee, scampering up the cliffs like terrified monkeys, tearing at each other in their efforts to get away from the thing that had him in its grip.

Jupiter Jones was a powerful man—doubly so on this planet of mild gravity. Furthermore he'd been in too many tight scrapes to be overly bothered with scruples.

Recovering from his first shock, he twisted the carbine over his shoulder until he felt the muzzle prod into flesh and pulled the trigger.

The flat vicious "craack!" of the rifle slapped back from the cliffs. The arms relaxed. He wrenched himself free, spun around.

One glance told him these were the lean red-haired savages he'd seen last night. He was already pulling the trigger as he recognized them. The shot knocked the nearest brute off his feet.

The others hesitated, ringing him in like a pack of wolves. Down the trail, the two green tinted porters stood nervously, the litter perched atop their shoulders.

The glittering purple-shelled octopod was sitting bolt upright in the litter. At this distance it looked like a huge snail—an obese snail that has grown out of its shell. Perched on one of its tentacles was a kite-like thing.

Jupiter jerked the gun around. But at that moment the purple shelled monstrosity tossed the kite-thing into the air where it spread enormous membrane wings.

With a shock, he realized that the kite was alive—a huge, flying, web-like bird!

He put a bullet through it. But if the shot had the least effect, it wasn't apparent. The creature swooped at him suddenly like a hawk dropping on a rabbit.

He shot again, then tried to hurl himself aside, but the pack hampered his movements. One moist wing snared him, slapped around him like wet rubber. He twisted, squirmed toppled to the ground, rolling over and over.

The other wing lapped around him, binding his arms to his side, squeezing, squeezing.

The pain was intolerable.

As if from a distance, he could hear shouting. The savages had closed around him, snarling, baying triumphantly like hounds at the kill, but he was only dimly conscious of them.

The octopod on the litter put a silver tube to its mouth. A loud mourning note wound through the jungle.

The horn! It was the horn, he'd heard earlier. It was also the last sound that he heard, for the terrible constriction never relaxed. Blackness welled up suddenly behind his eyes, blotted out everything.

WHEN Jupiter Jones struggled back to consciousness, he was lying in a cage like a wild animal.

The realization shocked him.

The cage, he saw, was about two and a half meters long, very narrow and barely high enough for him to sit up in. It was only one of a whole row of such cages, and they were all occupied by men and women like himself.

His gun was gone. His pack, even his clothes had been taken away from him. He grasped one of the bars, pulled himself to a sitting posture. His neck felt stiff and for a moment his head swam dizzily. Then the scene jarred into focus.

Afternoon sunlight overlaid everything like an angry orange wash. Striped tents had been pitched along the river bank. Four of the purple-shelled octopods squatted about a cloth spread on the ground beneath the largest pavilion.

Its sides had been raised to permit the free flow of air, and he could see the creatures plucking food from strange

vessels and goblets with their snakey tentacles.

All about the tents green men and copper-skinned hunters milled in a senseless jostling confusion like a circus breaking its stand.

Suddenly, his eyes narrowed. The octopods were being waited on by a hairless pink skinned species of human. That made four distinct races he'd observed since landing. He ticked them off on his fingers—the cave people, the red haired fighting men, the green and stolid porters. Now these bald, hairless white slugs of men.

The white men were doing most of the work, herding the porters about, packing chop boxes. Jupiter frowned. An odd little protuberance, he discovered, sprouted from the backs of all their necks.

The protuberances varied in size, some no larger than a small snail shell, others as big as a tangerine. They were plum colored and looked as if they were made of horn. What the devil could the things be?

He shifted his eyes to a lank, coppery fighting man and saw that he bore one of the things on the back of his neck also. They all did, he realized with a sudden dryness of mouth.

All along he'd been aware vaguely of the stiffness in his spine. With a thrill of alarm, he felt the back of his neck, touched a knob-like thing just below the base of his skull.

The shock of the discovery left him sick at his stomach.

He examined it gently with his finger tips. It was small, hard. He had the uncomfortable conviction that it was alive, feeding off of him like a leech.

He tugged at it, but it was firmly anchored, the flesh about it quite numb. In panic he tried to twist it off.

Instantly a blinding flash of pain seared through him like acid tingling out to the very tips of his fingers. He pitched forward, cracked his head on the bars of his cage, slid to a prone position.

For moments he lay there unable to lift a finger although his brain was clear, lucid. It was as if the thing had perceived his intention and had paralyzed the voluntary motor centers of his brain!

WITH mounting horror, Jones realized that the molusk-like organism must be fastened directly to his spinal cord. He had best not meddle with it again until he learned more about it.

"Za'min—car!" he heard a voice say behind him.

He sat up, looked around, realized with a start that the paralysis was gone, leaving no appreciable ill effects.

There was a girl in the next cage watching him out of wide yellow eyes. She was one of the cave people, he recognized with a scowl of suspicion. It was impossible to mistake the air of wildness about her—like a caged leopard.

She was quite naked, crouching in her cell with her uncombed black hair hanging down to her sturdy brown shoulders.

"Za'min—car?" she repeated.

He shook his head. What the devil was the girl driving at?

She looked puzzled then touched her breast, said: "Lete."

"Lady?"

"Lete—Lete—Lete," she insisted, jabbing herself in the chest each time.

She had small flashing white teeth, a pretty face, brown as sepia. In fact she was sepia all over, a warm rich tint that made Jupiter Jones uncomfortably conscious of the fish-belly whiteness of his own skin.

But it was her eyes that caught his interest. The iris was large, yellow, flecked with green like a cat's eye. The pupil wasn't round but a narrow slit.

He wondered if Lete was her name or the name of her tribe or what. He pointed at another captive, said:

"Lete?"

The girl revolved her right shoulder with an impatient gesture that fascinated him.

"Io. Io. Ca'min 'Kagan'!" she said, or so the words sounded. Then she touched her breast. "Na'min 'Lete'."

Obviously the girl was trying to tell him that the cave people were called "Kagan", but that her name was "Lete".

Pointing eagerly at the scaly octopods beneath the pavilion he said, "What are they?" in a questioning tone.

For an instant fear mirrored itself in

Lete's yellow eyes. She shuddered, then she seemed to grasp what he wanted and said: "Anolyn."

"Anolyn," he repeated, "Anolyn." Next he pointed at the fighting men. They were "Nehogans", the porters were "Rik'gans".

Lete was an enthusiastic teacher and Jupiter began to acquire a sizable vocabulary. He didn't know how long they kept it up. Hours possibly. They were interrupted by the sudden opening of his cage door.

He stared at it in amazement, for it had swung back apparently of its own volition. There was no one within a dozen feet. There had been a "click", and then it had opened.

Before he could grasp what was happening, he found himself crawling out of the cage and standing up. Then he started for the pavilion where the purple-shelled octopods—the Anolyns as Lete called them—were waiting.

His brain reeled. He tried to stop. He couldn't! He had absolutely no command over his muscles!

It was like a nightmare. And yet his conscious mind wasn't in the least affected.

He entered the pavilion stooping slightly and stopped—like a machine subject to its operator's whim.

The Anolyns made no sound. They regarded him in utter silence, their tentacles waving in the air like the feelers of a cricket.

"What do you want?" Jupiter tried to ask and found that his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He'd been struck dumb!

The sweat popped out on his face, but his expression remained as unchanged as a wooden mask.

III

ALTOGETHER IT WAS THE most uncanny interview that Jupiter Jones had ever experienced. He stood paralyzed while the Anolyns scrutinized him.

Not a sound passed between the creatures, not an expression marred their soft white visages. It was impossible to even guess at their thoughts.

Jupiter had more than a smattering of biology, and he'd been confronted with weird forms of life before. But nothing so outlandish. He wished he could get one of the Anolyns on the dissecting table in the Mizar's laboratory.

Suddenly a thought impinged on his consciousness, an emotionless, inhuman query: "Where did you come from?"

He could feel the alien entity that was the octopod probing at his brain cells with invisible feelers of thought. He could no more resist answering than if he had been under the influence of salanedrin, the Venusian truth serum.

"Earth. A planet of the system of Sol." He gave the galactic space coordinates, but realized that they had no meaning outside their frame of reference. "From beyond the stars," he amplified.

"How?" There was shock, surprise, scepticism in the thought.

He visualized the starship, the space-warp that had flung him hundreds of parsecs out of his course. But he had the feeling that he might as well try to explain nuclear physics to a Hottentot.

He was conscious of a growing doubt in the minds of his captors—almost as if they were afraid of him. All at once, he felt himself turn, start out of the pavilion.

The Anolyns, he realized, must have finished their examination. But it was a startling sensation to find himself going back across the clearing like a sleep walker.

What had they learned? Had they picked his mind clean? One of the fighting Nehogans separated himself from his fellows and followed him back to the cages.

Without conscious volition, Jupiter stooped and crawled inside. The door shut after him with a "click". The lean red-haired Nehogan squatted on his heels just outside.

Jupiter wiped the sweat off his forehead, and instantly realized that he had regained control of his muscles.

It was dusk, a hazy burnt amber twilight that made everything appear as if he were wearing tinted glasses. The pink-skins had broken camp, loaded the Rik'gans formed them into a caravan. A detachment of fighting men moved to the head of the procession.

Jupiter's cage was equipped like the others with stretcher poles. Two squat porters approached and lifted it to their shoulders, moved into line with the other captives. One of the Anolyns gave a blast on a horn. The head of the caravan moved into the jungle.

Imperceptibly, darkness had fallen, but no lights were lit. The inhabitants of this strange world seemed to see as well by night as by day.

Jupiter could feel his bearers fall into a rough trot. The cage swayed, jolted rhythmically—an upsetting motion. He felt progressively worse and worse.

"Damn!" he thought miserably; "it's making me seasick!"

THE next two weeks were a period of orientation for Jupiter. The caravan travelled by night to avoid the heat. They were fed twice daily—a thick gruel-like substance in which chunks of meat and vegetables had been diced—and it never varied.

Neither did Jupiter's guard ever leave him. He was an aloof, ferocious man with a hawk nose, a copper red skin and pale blue eyes—ice blue eyes. His name, Jupiter learned, was Reiloc and he regarded the cavepeople with contempt, the porters with scorn, the pink skins with loathing.

As they wound down out of the mountains onto a broad plain, Jupiter had managed to pick up a smattering of the language from Lete who occupied the cage just ahead.

The wild girl was devoured by curiosity, but when Jupiter tried to explain where he had come from, she grew frightened and silent.

"The Wanderer-from-Beyond!" he overheard her telling Reiloc in a low voice. "Did you hear him? Is it true, Reiloc?"

The copper skinned fighting man scratched his head.

"We caught him near your village. He fought with thunder and lightning. He carried many queer tools in a pack, which no one understands. It's very strange, too, that the night before, we saw a blazing ship fall out of the sky. But when we went to investigate, the ship was unharmed.

Then it burst into a blinding ball of light. We didn't stay."

Lete clasped the bars, peered at Jupiter wide-eyed.

"The flaming chariot! It was you who came down from the stars!"

Jupiter nodded.

"The Wanderer!" she repeated in an awed voice. "You are the Wanderer-from-Beyond! With the Sword of Fire!"

He frowned, started to shake his head.

"Who is this Wanderer supposed to be?"

"But you must be him," Lete almost pleaded. "At night the old men gather around the fires and tell of his coming." Her voice had taken on a mystic quality. "Out of the night sky he'll come in his chariot of flames, they say, like a star fallen to Yogol. The Wanderer-from-Beyond. He'll come with lighting in his hand—the Sword of Fire—and drive the Anolyn back into the sea, back into the slime from whence they arose.

"He'll free all the men of Yogol and restore their knowledge. Then he'll ascend in a ball of fire, vanish into the beyond."

Jupiter didn't say anything. The legend was only too familiar. Terran history was full of such folk heroes sent to free the people from their oppressors. It was always the same fundamentally, and it always cropped up wherever there was a conquered, downtrodden, helpless people. The myth seemed to answer some universal human need.

Even Reiloc, he saw, appeared excited and uneasy.

"Suppose I am?" Jupiter suggested.

"Why, then—you'll destroy the Anolyn." Lete's face fell. "But you're as helpless as we are! You're not the Wanderer after all. You've been making fun of me."

Reiloc burst into relieved laughter, and Lete looked hurt.

"Stranger things have happened," said Jupiter dryly. He didn't intend to throw away any possible advantage that might accrue to him if these savages believed him to be the mythical Wanderer. He was shrewd enough though, to perceive that he wouldn't appear very impressive in a cage, and filed the idea away, turning the subject to the Anolyn instead.

THIS was a hunting party, he learned. They were headed back now for the city. Jupiter wondered what they called it.

The city didn't have a name, Lete insisted. She called it the city by the Dra Dur, which meant Red Sea. Yes, there were other cities, but none of them had a name.

"Why should they?" Reiloc grunted.

What were the Anolyn? Such a strange question. Jupiter could see for himself that they were—well, Anolyn.

Neither Reiloc nor Lete understood what he was driving at. The Anolyn were different, they admitted, but all things were different.

It was obvious that the cave girl and the fighting man considered themselves separate species and hated each other cordially.

The humans who associated themselves with the Anolyn, Lete informed him with scorn in her voice, were "Edir".

"Edir" as near as Jupiter could make out, meant "voluntary slave"; a term that brought a savage growl from Reiloc and shut him up for three days.

The Anolyn, Lete told Jupiter, entered into a person once they caught him, and that person was "Edir" forever. He couldn't escape. Why? Because no one ever had.

She didn't know what the thing on the back of her neck was, and neither did Reiloc. The Anolyn had put it there, and it was dangerous to meddle with it.

And that was as much as Jupiter could learn.

ON the fifteenth day they struck a small farming community, and after that they traveled by day on a paved road between cultivated fields.

Jupiter saw many more of the green tinted Rik'gans being used like draft animals. There were also black hairy people with tails who were kept in pens and watched the caravan pass out of sad, lack-luster eyes.

The hairy men were Begans, Lete told him. The Anolyn bred them for food. Occasionally they ate the Rik'gans, but the meat was coarse and tough.

Horror sprang into Jupiter's green eyes.

"They eat them?"

Lete shrugged. "Of course. And so have you."

He went deathly pale. He could feel his stomach revolt at the thought.

"The Anolyn breed men for special purposes," Lete went on, unaware of the loathing in his eyes, "fighters, meat animals, the pink-skinned Caligans. Oh, there must be fifteen or sixteen different kinds. They're all 'Edir'," and she dismissed them with a shrug of her shapely brown shoulders.

Jupiter's cage was swaying along the plastic ribbon of a road. It was all he could do to keep from being sick, but he knew now the subtle distinction that had been troubling him.

The humans weren't slaves. They were domesticated—like cattle or dogs or horses. And Lete's people were wild with all the contempt of the wild thing for its tame cousin!

Reiloc, trotting beside the cage, grunted suddenly and raised his arm, pointing ahead. Jupiter lifted his eyes, felt a tingle of excitement run through him.

There, glittering in the rays of the setting sun were the spires and battlements of the city by the *Dra Dur*.

NIGHT had fallen by the time they reached the city gate. Yogol, as Lete called the planet, had no satellite. The darkness was unrelieved except by the faint starshine.

The caravan halted beneath towering walls of deeper blackness. In his cage Jupiter heard a horn sound, then a groaning that must be the massive gate rolling aside. The caravan began to move again.

They passed into a canyon between dark buildings. And all about him he could hear the shuffle of feet, low voices. He was like a blind man in the midst of a crowd.

Strange spicy smells beset his nostrils and a cold dank, salty odor that must be the *Dra Dur*. He could hear the lap of water and shouts and loud thumpings and the creak of tackle. And through it all ran the sibilant voice of the invisible throng.

After an interminable march, they

turned through a massive entrance into a well lit building. The noise of the city stopped as the door swung shut behind them. Jupiter squinted his eyes, blinded by the sudden light.

Sometime before, the caravan had split up, and only the cages holding the wild people remained. Then without warning, they too turned off down a bisecting passage.

"Lete!" he yelled after the girl; "Lete!" His own bearers were carrying his cage straight ahead. The girl waved at him forlornly and called:

"A'towee, Jupiter."

It meant, "Goodbye forever" as near as he could translate it. He felt lonely—more lonely even than after Briggs' suicide.

Good Lord! he thought in alarm. He'd better watch himself. He'd been in space so long that he was growing overly fond of this naked little barbarian. The biological urge could be a damned traitorous emotion, and there was no place for a woman in his plans.

He frowned. Unless he should need Lete to lead him back to his ship . . .

"Where are they taking the others?" he demanded of Reiloc who still paced soundlessly beside his cage.

"To the training pits."

"And me?"

Reiloc appeared puzzled. "To the house of the Radiant God. But it's very strange."

Before Jupiter could voice the questions rising to his lips, a door opened in the wall ahead. He was borne inside an enormous vaulted chamber, his cage dropped on the floor. Reiloc hadn't entered, and the porters retreated through the door. It closed behind them.

Jupiter though, had scarcely been aware of their departure. His whole attention was focused on a huge statue of an Anolyn dominating the room.

The idol shed a soft luminence, and there was a sense of power in its execution that was god-like:

"In their own image," he thought irreverently, then he sucked in his breath.

The stuff of the image was radio-active! Some incredibly rich uranium or thorium bearing ore. Radium too! He'd never seen anything quite like it. Neither pitchblende

nor carnotite. And it must weigh a ton! Enough to take him half way across the super galaxy!

He gave a harsh laugh. He had found his fuel. It only remained for him to escape carrying a ton of heathen idol with him!

IV

JUPITER WAS CROUCHING ON the floor of his cage when the door to the corridor opened softly behind him. He turned his head.

A girl, he saw, had slipped inside. She let the panel close behind her, stared at him out of wide violet-blue eyes.

She was a slim fragile thing with pale yellow hair like winter sunlight. A Caligan, a pink-skinned woman, he realized. The first he'd seen.

She wore a shoulderless, clinging, single-piece garment of yellow fur. Suddenly the garment moved, pulling itself higher up one shoulder, settling snugly about her waist.

Moved of its own volition!

"It's alive!" Jupiter burst out. "What in Heaven's name is that thing?"

The girl wrinkled her forehead. "Of course, it's alive. It's a boj. Have you never seen one?"

He shook his head.

She lifted the creature away from her skin, held it out to him through the bars.

"Put it on."

Jupiter took it gingerly. It was light and flat with the warm limp feel of a fresh pelt. The under side of the boj was hairless, the skin like foam rubber. He could find neither eyes nor mouth.

The girl sensed what he was looking for, laughed infectiously.

"It hasn't any," she said; "it breathes and feeds through its skin. Put it on."

Jupiter let it touch his body. At once the boj wrapped itself around him. It was electrically alive, vibrant. He could feel a pleasant tingle in his nerve ends and glanced at the Caligan girl in surprise.

She wore an amused expression and nothing else. There was an utter lack of self consciousness about her. Jupiter found himself comparing her soft, deli-

cately rounded figure with Lete's lithe brown boyishness.

The Caligan girl suddenly held out her hand for the boj. He peeled it off reluctantly, asking:

"Who are you?"

"Tabak," she replied. "Did you come to Yogol in a fiery chariot from beyond the stars?"

He nodded.

Tabak's blue eyes widened. She drew close to the cage as if pulled by a magnet, peered intently into his eyes.

"May—may I come into your mind?"

Jupiter's hard, bewhiskered face stiffened in surprise.

"Telepathy! Is that what you mean? Can you do that?"

"A little—if you help. We Caligans are closer to the Anolyn than the other races. But we haven't much time before they come to examine you. Won't you let your barriers down? The whole city is alive with rumors . . ."

JUPITER had recoiled instinctively from having his innermost privacy violated. He scowled in suspicion, asked: "Who sent you? What're you after?"

"No one." She bit her lip. "There's a legend, a—a myth if you like, about the 'Wanderer-from-Beyond', who is to drive the Anolyn back into the sea."

He scratched his beard which had grown back since his captivity.

"How did you get in here?"

"I'm a favorite of one of the Anolyn. I've the run of the temple. Please, please let me inside. I must know. You'll understand much more about Yogol than I could ever tell you."

Her last words decided him. He needed information desperately if he were ever to escape.

"What shall I do?" he asked in grudging consent.

"Will me to enter. Think! Open your mind to me. There's nothing to fear. No need to be suspicious. I'm not an Anolyn. I can't force myself on you . . ."

A dazzling light seemed to burst behind Jupiter's eyes. The girl was in. He could feel her!

He was aware of Tabak's mind, quest-

ing, probing. His brain pulsed as if he had a violent headache.

At the same time, a whole new set of memory patterns, unfamiliar facts, stray incidents and ideas made themselves felt. It was as if a volume of the Encyclopedia Galactica had been up-ended and all the information therein had been poured into his brain helter-skelter with the utmost confusion.

Somehow, he knew all that Tabak knew, all that she'd ever felt or seen or heard; but horribly jumbled, meaningless like the scrambled parts of an intricate jig-saw puzzle.

He heard her exclaim aloud: "It's true! The Wanderer - from - Beyond!" Then a fear thought: "*I must go! They musn't find me here!*"

He felt her mind withdraw, saw her slip from the temple room, a slim, graceful figure in the shimmering yellow fur cloak—the living sensuous boj. He was too appalled to try to stop her.

His mind was like a warehouse of unrelated, unassorted, unassimilated facts. He needed time to incorporate the confusing jumble into intelligible order.

Time and contemplation.

He was to get neither yet, he saw, for the door opened almost on Tabak's heels, and three of the Anolyns crawled in like fat, purple-shelled snails.

JUPITER was put through one of the worst ordeals of his life—all the more degrading because it was conducted in contemptuous silence.

The Anolyns took immediate possession of his mind. He was made to crawl out of his cage and stand stock still while they examined him like judges at a fat cattle show.

From time to time burning mental questions exploded in his brain. Jupiter was enough of a psychologist to know that they were intended to stimulate subconscious memory patterns.

He felt as if he'd been thrust into a press and all his information was being squeezed out of him like cider from an apple. But unlike his experience with Tabak, he could learn nothing from them.

The Anolyn maintained a perfect mental barrier.

In spite of that he began to sense that they regarded him with growing alarm. He could almost feel their control over him tighten.

At length he was directed out into the corridor, marched into a tiny bare cell. Not until the door closed on him with a small final click, did the Anolyn remove their control.

Jupiter sank white and shaken onto the hard, narrow bunk.

The cell was about ten feet square, windowless with walls of bare white plastic. The ceiling was plastered with a green phosphorescent mould, lighting it eerily. There was a single stool and a table and that was all.

He locked his hands beneath his head. His green eyes looked older. They seemed to peer inward as he sought to organize the flood of information he'd received almost instantaneously in that startling, intimate exchange with Tabak.

Gradually it dawned on him that he was in full possession of Tabak's life history—all the millions of insignificant items that went to make up the girl's personality.

Once he realized that, the pieces began to click into place. It was indeed like a jig-saw puzzle. And slowly the picture appeared.

Tabak was a pet, like a cat or dog, and as such she'd had a greater opportunity to observe the purple-shelled octopods.

The Anolyns hadn't always been the dominant life form on Yogol. Ages ago, eons perhaps—Tabak had entertained only the vaguest notion of time—the humans had ruled the planet. They had built splendid cities, now crumbled into dust and even the dust buried beneath the jungle mould. Only the legend remained.

The ancients, according to that legend, had experimented finally with telepathy. They had discovered that the young of the Anolyn — a semi-intelligent, telepathic, parasite—acted as a thought receiver and transmitter if it were allowed to fasten its tentacles directly into the spinal cord.

The fad spread. More and more Yogolians began to make use of the telepathic parasites.

Then one day the adult Anolyn rose from the sea and, through their young, took over the human race.

Not all at once and not everyone.

Some had refused to allow the Anolyn to be fastened to their necks. These few fled to the wilderness, where during ages of warfare with their Anolyn dominated brothers, they had sunk into barbarism. These were the Kagans, the wild cave people whom the Anolyn now hunted for sport.

As for the Anolyn themselves, they had abandoned the fallen human cities, building their citadels around the inland seas from whence they'd sprung. They had evolved their own unique culture.

They appeared to know only the most rudimentary facts of the physical sciences, though they had made startling advances in the biological field.

Even their cities were built by minute, coral-like creatures working under telepathic direction. Certain insects had been trained to spin thread from their own body secretions and weave fabrics. Humans had been bred for specialized functions: draft animals and meat animals, soldiers and sailors and artisans.

As soon as a Yogolian attained adolescence, a young Anolyn was fastened to his spinal cord. Thus the humans were forced to act both as living incubators for the Anolyn young and as servants for the adults.

It was, Jupiter realized with horror, a wholly parasitic culture. Orgies were held, and gladiatorial combats, one Anolyn pitting its human vehicle against another. Empathy was perfect.

There were other things, unmentionable things which Jupiter tried to thrust from his mind. Scenes from the training pits, the biological breeding stations . . .

He was sick at his stomach, sick and emotionally exhausted. He could see no hope of escape. Not so long as the horrid parasite remained fastened to his spinal cord.

And by its very nature the creature couldn't be dislodged or killed!

He closed his eyes, feeling as depleted as if he'd run the mile, slid over the lip of consciousness into deep sleep.

V

HE WAS ROUSED BY TABAK, the Caligan girl, shaking his shoulder. "Wake up!" she was whispering urgently, her violet-blue eyes shining with suppressed excitement. "Wake up, Wanderer-from-Beyond, and come with me!"

Jupiter sat up with a start. "How did you get in here?"

Tabak rotated her shoulder, and the yellow furred boj rippled like liquid light. "Through the door."

"But it was locked."

"It operates by telepathic control."

"Of course."

Jupiter scratched his beard. He'd known it all along. Nor was that all. If he would only concentrate, he could manipulate the lock himself!

To his growing amazement, he realized that he knew the city by the *Dra Dur* as well as his home town of Venusport.

While he slept, his subconscious had integrated Tabak's fund of knowledge, made it a part of his own. He was changed. He didn't look at things quite the same. His own hard ruthless personality had become tintured with something of Tabak's soft deviousness.

He didn't like it.

His fingers closed on the girl's shoulders, bit into the flesh. "What have you done to me?"

"I? I've done nothing. I've come to help you, Wanderer-from-Beyond."

"How?"

"Please," she said; "don't you believe me?"

"Why should I?"

She lifted her arms, touched his temples with her fingertips. "Come in," she said simply. "Come into my mind so that you can have no more doubts."

Almost against his will, he peered into her eyes, experiencing an odd frightening sensation of sinking into their wide, violet-blue depths. Down. Down. His very being seemed to merge with the girl's.

All at once, the room swam back into his vision, but from a different angle. Everything looked a little strange. Then he saw himself!

Literally!

Saw himself through Tabak's eyes!

With a peculiar sense of detachment, he observed his own lean, muscular, sun-reddened frame, his wiry red beard, tangled hair half-closed green eyes. And all the time he was aware of Tabak's flow of thought—her emotions, sensations, the bubbling fluid well of her subconscious.

"Now do you trust me?"

Jupiter was acutely embarrassed. Their conjoining was more intimate than any physical relation could have been. Tabak's very soul lay naked before his mind's eye.

"Trust you. Yes. For Pete's sake, let me go!"

He staggered, blinked, realized that she'd thrust him out of her mind. He wiped the sweat off his forehead, stared at the girl curiously.

Her cheeks were pink with confusion, and she wouldn't meet his eyes.

"I—I've never done that with a man before," she said. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes. But how did you do it?"

"By means of the Anolyn that are attached to our necks. See." She turned her back, lifted her wheat-blond locks with one hand.

Jupiter could see the tiny plum-colored lump. Tabak's neck was slender, delicately formed. He was struck anew by the contrast between her and Lete, the wiry, pagan-souled cave girl.

Lete was rawhide, tough, pliable, resilient. But this Caligan girl was a steel rapier. In that moment of intimacy he had glimpsed something of the truth.

For all her apparent softness, Tabak could be infinitely more dangerous!

THE door opened instantly at Tabak's mental command. Jupiter followed her into the corridor, saw that it was empty.

"Where are the Anolyn?"

"They—they are occupied. Those here in the temple." Tabak shivered. "Come, it's on our way. I'll show you."

"On our way where? Show me what?"

She said, "I'd rather let you see for yourself," and started up the passage, her bare feet soundless on the hard composition floor.

Jupiter padded at her elbow. This was all familiar. He couldn't overcome the feeling that he'd been here before. It was Tabak's memory patterns playing tricks on him, he knew. The girl's experience had actually been implanted in his brain.

When they reached the ramp angling downward into the gloom, a vague alarm got hold of him, but he followed her onto it without protest.

The way led down and down. The air was dank. Moisture dripped from the walls. It grew slippery underfoot.

Abruptly, the ramp came to an end. He could see the glint of water ahead.

Subconsciously, he knew it was a canal running beneath the streets to the *Dra Dur*. He knew it just as he knew that there was a network of these canals like fingers reaching into every part of the city. Just as he knew of the ledge a scant foot above the water, even as Tabak crept onto it.

The living boj fur glowed with a pale phosphorescent light as she sidled into the vaulted aquaduct. It lent her a wraith-like appearance to Jupiter, a few paces behind. "Shhhh!" she cautioned him, coming to a stop. "Don't make a sound here!"

Jupiter's mouth felt dry. He could see nothing but the girl's vague luminous outline, hear nothing but the lap of water against the shelf at their feet.

Then Tabak clutched his hand, pulled him forward and into a bisecting passage running at right angles to the aquaduct. He could see the glow of light ahead.

The passage curved, the light bursting on his eyes, half blinding him. Together they crawled to the very end of the tunnel and peered out.

It was a courtyard that Jupiter found himself looking into. The orange sun beat down warmly on the flagstone pavement, on the large shallow pool in the center of the court.

There were Anolyn in the pool, fifty or sixty of them, floating like purple jellyfish. Humans, too. Pink skinned Caligans, wild Kagans, fighting men and the stolid green porters. Even the tailed, ape-like Begans were represented. They moved with a dreamy apathy like sleepwalkers.

"Their minds are under the control of

the Anolyn in the pool," Tabak breathed into his ear. "The Anolyn have entered into them. They feel and see and hear exactly what their human vehicles do."

Jupiter's face was drawn. He could hear music. The scale was all wrong, it registered discordantly in his ears. It was coming from one of the balconies that rose in tiers above the courtyard. Food and drink had been spread on cloths.

"They'll be here for days," Tabak whispered.

Hardened as Jupiter was, nevertheless he was sickened at the deeds being enacted under his eyes. They were unthinkable. His fists clenched.

He could bring himself to watch no longer. He turned his head away, said hoarsely: "Let's clear out of here."

Tabak was silent as she led him back down the tunnel to the vaulted canal.

"Can you swim?" she asked as they reached the water's edge.

"Yes."

The girl stripped off the boj, laid it on the ledge, dived into the canal like a slim, naked, sea nymph. Her head broke water a dozen feet out creating phosphorescent ripples.

Jupiter plunged after her. The water was black, cold, salty. He kept up with the girl easily using strong breast strokes.

At length she paused again, treading water near the opposite wall of the aqueduct.

"There's a tunnel here, a man's height below the surface. It leads into another chamber. Are you willing to try it?"

"Go ahead."

Tabak upended in a surface dive, the black water closing over her feet. Jupiter followed her down. He found the hole with his hand, swam into it. On and on—ten—twenty—thirty yards. His lungs felt as if they must burst.

Air began to dribble out his nose. He kicked furiously, driving himself ahead. Suddenly he realized he was out of the tunnel. He shot up to the surface, broke water, gasping air into his scalded lungs.

That had been close, too close. He floated on his back breathing deeply.

After a minute he rolled over and stared about him.

HE WAS in a vast echoing chamber. Orange sunshine streamed in from open skylights. Steps led down into the water. Tabak, he saw, was already standing on the edge of the floor looking down at him.

He swam to the steps, climbed out. There was a faint odor of putrefaction in the air.

Tabak said: "These rooms are the laboratories. There are other entrances; but they're all guarded by Nehogans."

He frowned. "What was it you wanted me to see?"

"This way," she said and led him through dissecting tables, past shelves of fantastic creatures preserved in some liquid, and into a small office-like room at the side.

Spread out on a shelf were the contents of Jupiter's pack: the medicine chest, emergency rations, spare ammunition, testing apparatus, prospecting tools, his light carbine, the electroscope and geiger counter. It was all there.

Tabak's violet-blue eyes glittered with excitement.

"There are your weapons, Wanderer—from-Beyond! Now you can drive the Anolyn back into the sea!"

Jupiter's face didn't betray his consternation. The carbine was pitifully inadequate. In fact, so long as the horrible little parasite was fastened to his spinal cord, he knew that he would be incapable of using it against the Anolyn.

If he could only rid himself of the parasite, though, and get to his ship with even a chunk of that idol . . .

He narrowed his eyes as a new thought struck him.

"Tabak, we must get rid of these spinal parasites first. I—" He nearly said, "I think," but realized that he mustn't show any doubt. "I can do it. But I'll need your cooperation."

"Can you?" she cried in excitement and seized his hands, peering into his eyes. "Can you really? You *are* the Wanderer, then!"

He looked quickly away. He didn't dare let her glimpse what was in his thoughts.

"Yes."

"Let me come into your mind; let me be sure," she pleaded.

"Tabak, you'll have to trust me."

"Why?" her blue eyes clouded in suspicion. She released his hands, backed away. "What is it you want to do to me? What are you hiding? What are you afraid I'll see?"

He swore under his breath. There wasn't time to argue, even if he could overcome the girl's suspicions, which he doubted was possible unless he opened his mind to her.

Without the slightest warning he jumped for Tabak, grabbed her and swung her off her feet.

The girl screamed, twisted, kicked and bit, wild with terror. The thick walls confined her cries. She was soft and tiny like a small white kitten in his hands. A spitting, scratching, squalling kitten.

He imprisoned her arms and legs, carried her out into the main laboratory.

The Anolyn possessed no anaesthesia. The dissecting tables were equipped instead with straps to hold their victims motionless while they operated. Jupiter buckled the girl face down on one of the tables.

"Please!" she begged hysterically. "Please!"

"I'm not going to hurt you," he growled and left her to get his medicine kit from the other room.

The kit had been devised to handle almost any emergency that might befall one of the Galactic Colonization Board's special corpsmen. Jupiter found the hypodermic syringe, sterilized it and filled it with exsrocin. The drug was the latest development in a spinal anaesthetic that deadened the nerves of the entire body, inducing a temporary state of suspended animation.

It was a delicate operation, but he inserted the needle between two of the girl's vertebrae, felt her flinch away from him. She lay on the hard slab, quiescent, crying silently.

"Won't hurt," he grunted, and ejected the exsrocin directly into the spinal fluid. Under his breath he counted: "One-two-three-four."

He felt for her pulse, but there was no sign of a heart beat. He found the mirror in the kit, held it before her nostrils. The

mirror didn't cloud.

Sweat stood out on Jupiter's forehead. He wiped his palms on his thighs, lifted Tabak's wheat blonde locks, exposing the small purple protuberance. It looked like a sea shell fastened to the back of her neck.

His hand was trembling. He had to pause and get a grip on himself. Then he grasped the Anolyn, pulled it gently but firmly away from the girl's skin.

For a moment he thought it was going to stick, then it slid free, the tentacles dangling like short, fine threads.

He examined the creature minutely to make sure no faintest spark of consciousness remained.

He felt weak with relief. The spinal anaesthesia had worked, putting the Anolyn into a state of suspended animation at the same time that it had the girl.

Suddenly he could contain himself no longer. He hurled the creature down on the hard floor with all his strength, smashed it into a shapeless blob, ground it into paste with the butt of his carbine.

VI

IT WOULD BE AN HOUR BEFORE the effects of the anaesthesia wore off the Caligan girl. Jupiter prowled the laboratories, investigating the extent of the research performed by the Anolyn. It was crude, elementary.

Only with the breeding of specialized forms had they had any starting successes and that had been a trial and error, hit and miss practice that had taken literally thousands of years.

He was not impressed. Like all parasitic cultures, the Anolyn civilization was rotten at the core, degenerate. One ship of the Galactic Security Patrol could wipe them out of existence.

He found clothes in a locker, a kilt for himself and a length of some black fabric which Tabak should be able to use in lieu of the boj.

When he returned to the dissecting table he saw that the color was returning to the girl's cheeks. He unfastened her, sat down on a stool and waited.

After a moment, Tabak's lids flickered. Her eyes opened; she gazed at him in sudden terror.

"Feel the Anolyn," he said.

She sat up. Her hand went hesitantly to the back of her slender neck. He saw the amazement spread over her face.

"It's gone! You—How? How did you do it?"

She slipped suddenly from the blood-stained dissecting table, seized his hand, held it to her forehead. She was half laughing, half crying.

"You are the Wanderer! Forgive me for ever doubting. I'll atone for my sacrilege." She was hysterical with relief and awe and hope. "I'll never question your will again, never fail in obedience—"

"Rubbish!"

Jupiter regarded her startled expression with satisfaction.

"You're temporarily overcome by surprise," he went on. "You haven't had a chance to think. I know you inside out—too well to believe I could fool you for very long. And," he added ruefully; "you know me the same way. There's the rub. But I need you—and you need me."

The girl was silent.

"Yes," she agreed finally; "that's true. You're a man. A strange man. But you're not the Wanderer. You plan to use us to help you escape back to your ship, then desert us. But I don't think you will. Desert us, I mean."

It was Jupiter's turn to look discontented.

"Why not?"

"Because—" she began and started to smile. "You won't like this, but you're too soft. Deep down on the inside you're too fine, too idealistic to pull a trick like that. Your conscience wouldn't let you."

"You've been hurt. Many times. When I looked inside your mind, I could see the scars. I could feel how you'd armored yourself with a harsh shell to hide your true feelings. You have a saying among your own people: 'Scratch a cynic and you'll find an idealist!'"

"Well, I'll be damned," said Jupiter. Then almost hesitantly, "But you'll help. I need someone I can trust." He wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Someone I

can trust with my life to take the Anolyn from my own neck."

"You'll trust me," she said; "because you must. You're really not self-sufficient. No one is."

Jupiter regarded her silently, coldly. Then he picked up the hypodermic, sterilized it, filled the barrel with exsorcain.

"This is a damned ticklish trick. The needle must be inserted between the vertebrae so that it doesn't injure the spinal cord and yet—"

"Lie down," she interrupted. "I know as well as you how it must be done."

"But—"

"Don't be alarmed. I'm in possession of all your experience, just as you are of mine!"

Jupiter swallowed, laid face-down on the stained table. "For Heaven's sake, be careful!"

Tabak ran her fingertips along his backbone, locating the spot to insert the needle. It sent cold chills prickling through his skin.

"And you're sure you know exactly what to do?"

She laughed. "Of course, I know. Don't tell me you've forgotten the girl on Betelgeuse XI—the one you used to put into a state of suspended animation whenever you had to ship out so that she couldn't be unfaithful between voyages."

Jupiter made a choking sound. Before he could think of anything to say, he felt the needle prick his flesh. He winced, heard Tabak begin to count:

"One . . . two . . ."

SLOWLY Jupiter became conscious of a smart in the nape of his neck like a bee sting. He opened his eyes, sat up, touched the base of his skull.

The hard little lump was gone.

Relief left him weak. He caught Tabak's eye, felt his face grow warm.

"About that girl on Betelgeuse XI—" he began uncomfortably.

"You don't need to explain. Under the circumstances you were entirely justified."

He swore under his breath, slid off the table, began to throw his equipment into the pack. "Have you any ideas about how

we can get out of here?"

"Don't be angry, Jupiter. I was only teasing. I—"

Tabak's eyes suddenly widened.

She was staring beyond him, Jupiter realized. He twisted around, reaching instinctively for his carbine.

Not thirty feet behind them an adult Anolyn sprawled on the floor, tentacles exploring the air. Its soft brown eyes were regarding them intently. The gray doughy face was expressionless.

"Quick! Kill it!" Tabak screamed. "Kill it before it sends out a call for help!"

The creature was obviously puzzled, unable to understand why the two humans failed to respond to its control.

Jupiter shot it squarely between the eyes.

The hollow, pointed bullet, blew away the entire back of its head. It slumped into a quivering heap. A pool of thin, pinkish blood made an ever-widening stain on the floor.

"The cat's out of the bag now," he said in a tight voice.

Tabak nodded.

"There's a guard at the door. You'll have to kill him, Jupiter, before we can get out of here. I only hope you're as good as you think you are."

Jupiter took a short length of strong plastic cord from his pack, made a loop in it. His face looked older, grimmer. His vivid green eyes were dull.

"Where is he stationed?" he said.

THE dissection laboratory occupied a long, hall-like room in one wing of the temple. The pool of water was at one end, the main entry at the other.

Tabak wound the black cloth about herself sarong-fashion, nodded towards the arched doorway.

"There's a—a lobby of sorts through there. The guard stays just outside on the street. He'll be a Nehogan, Jupiter. They're terrible men—"

Jupiter brushed past her. He reached the lobby, crossed it swiftly.

"Open the door," he said to Tabak who had followed him.

She looked suddenly frightened.

"I can't, Jupiter. Not without the Ano-

lyn on the back of my neck to transmit my thought! We'll have to go back the way we came."

His eyes sought the door. The blank, solid panel mocked him. He ran his fingers over its surface, but could find no slightest protuberance anywhere.

"Look out!" Tabak suddenly whispered.

Jupiter sprang back like a startled cat.

The door was opening.

The thick, solid panel swung inexorably inward. He flattened himself against the wall, the carbine clubbed in his hands. His palms were sweaty.

Then an Anolyn appeared in the entrance, scuttled inside on its eight tentacles. Jupiter swung the carbine.

There was a dull crunch as the stock connected with the creature's head. Jupiter didn't give it a second glance, but sprang into the doorway.

A tall, coppery Nehogan warrior lounged just outside. With a flick of his wrist, he dropped the loop of plastic over the guard's head, yanked him backward through the door.

Any cry the Nehogan might have uttered was cut off at its source. He thrashed wildly, but Jupiter only tightened the noose, the muscles in his arms and shoulders bunching savagely.

Suddenly he got a look at the man's distorted face.

"Reiloc!" he cried and immediately slackened the cord.

Reiloc sprawled on the floor, gasping painfully.

"Are you crazy?" Tabak cried. "Kill him, Jupiter! Kill him before he can give the alarm." She suddenly snatched the carbine, aimed a blow at the prone warrior's head. Jupiter tore it out of her hands.

Reiloc pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. He looked from the dead Anolyn to Jupiter, his hand massaging his bruised throat.

"What are you?" he whispered painfully. "What manner of man are you who can kill the Anolyn in their own temple?"

Jupiter's hesitation didn't show on his face. In a cold voice of authority, he said:

"The Wanderer-from-Beyond!"

Reiloc's eyes widened. Doubt and hope

struggled in his grim countenance. Then the savage Nehogan dropped to one knee, held his sword out to Jupiter, hilt first.

JUPITER sat beside the embrasure, staring out at the street below. Behind him Reiloc was pacing back and forth in the bare little cell like a caged wolf. The copper skinned Nehogan was nervous, worried. Action was his only emotional release.

Tabak said: "Stop it, Reiloc! You're driving me crazy!"

Reiloc quit pacing, squatted on his heels. But he couldn't stay still. Rising to his feet again, he growled: "Wait, wait. Are we waiting for them to come drag us out of here and take us to the vivisection rooms?"

Tabak said: "Only for a little while longer."

The Earth man continued to stare morosely down at the street. Under Tabak's guidance the three of them had secreted themselves in this neglected cell just off the sanctum of the Radiant God.

When the city was new this chamber had been a part of the defenses of the temple in case of an uprising. But as the ages crept past without any threat from the human cattle, even its existence had gradually been forgotten.

Outside, the city by the Dra Dur was in the grip of hysteria. The alarm had gone out and the street below was deserted except for occasional patrols of Nehogans.

Jupiter squinted at the angry orange sun. It seemed to rest on the rooftops. Only a minute or two and the ceremony should begin. He faced back into the room.

Tabak said: "I think it's crazy."

"Crazy or not, we need her," Jupiter said. "We can't hope to succeed without her."

He closed his eyes searching the memory patterns imprinted on his brain by Tabak.

The temple was built in the form of a hollow square with the breeding pens located in the main courtyard. Every day the human guinea pigs were driven up a back way into the sanctum of the Radiant God. There they were exposed to the hard radiations emitted by the statue.

No wonder the Anolyn could create endless mutations. The effects of hard radiation on the genes were known to every school child in the Galactic Federation.

He was still standing beside the window when the faint sound of cymbals broke the silence.

"Here they come!" Tabak whispered.

Reiloc stiffened, jerked out his sword. He put his hand to the back of his neck as if to reassure himself that the Anolyn was actually gone. Jupiter had removed it while they waited. Its absence seemed to give the Nehogan confidence.

"You both know what to do?" Jupiter asked.

"Yes."

He adjusted the pack over his shoulders, picked up his carbine, assured himself that a cartridge lay in the chamber. The clash of cymbals was louder, reinforced by the chant of voices.

He went to the door, followed by Reiloc and Tabak. There was a short dark passage beyond which ended abruptly in a solid wall. A well opened in the ceiling overhead, though, with a ladder bolted inside it.

He gave Tabak a boost up into the well, then Reiloc. In a moment they'd climbed out of sight.

Jupiter leaped upward, caught the bottom rung, pulled himself hand over hand up into the thick darkness.

The clash of cymbals, the chant of voices had a hollow, muffled quality. He heard Tabak pant, then whisper, "I've got it open!" The cymbals were suddenly louder.

He crawled out of the well on Reiloc's heels, replaced the cover.

They were inside the sanctum, he saw, where he'd been left when he had first been brought to the city by the Dra Dur. The huge radioactive statue of the Anolyn was the only source of light. It shed a chill greenish pallor through the circular temple room.

The room itself was at least a hundred feet across, surrounded by pillared cloisters. They had come up behind the pillars where the feeble light from the idol scarcely reached.

The rhythmic chant came from the other side of the floor. Jupiter sucked in his breath. A procession of humans was filing out of the darkness.

A scrawny, naked Caligan was in the lead, making cabalistic signs with a phallic instrument resembling the Egyptian sistrum as he moved in front of the idol.

Behind him came the others, two by two—wild Kagans fresh from the jungle, a man with four arms, several with prehensile tails, some with fur and some hairless. They walked with the same dreamy pre-occupied air of the humans that Jupiter had seen in the courtyard, and prostrated themselves before the glowing idol. They were possessed, dominated by the lone Anolyn who brought up the rear.

Lete was the fourth from the end.

The cymbals suddenly clashed and fell silent. The ritual was about to begin.

Jupiter brought the rifle to his shoulder, took careful aim at the purple-shelled octopod directing the ceremony, pulled the trigger.

VII

THE SHOT REVERBERATED IN the chamber of horrors like a clap of thunder. The lone Anolyn slumped forward, half its head shot away.

With drawn sword, Reiloc leaped past Jupiter. He ran for the glowing idol, began to hack at one of ten tentacles with his sword. Tabak and Jupiter were right behind him. They grabbed Lete by either arm, hauled the bemused cave girl to her feet.

Some of the shock of the Anolyn's sudden death had been transmitted to the humans under its control. They stared at the profaners of the temple with pained uncomprehending eyes.

Reiloc snatched up the severed radio-active tentacle, dashed after Jupiter and Tabak who were half carrying Lete between them.

"This way!" Tabak cried. "This way!"

They burst out of the sanctum into a broad corridor, almost ran over another Anolyn. Jupiter shot it in its tracks.

No signs of pursuit had developed by

the time they reached the ramp. Lete was recovering from her shock. She struggled wildly, cried:

"What's happening? What are you doing with me?"

"We're escaping," Jupiter grunted.

"But you can't. The first Anolyn we meet will stop us. I don't understand—"

"Be silent, foolish one," growled Reiloc, "he's the Wanderer!"

"But you're Edir!"

"We're Edir no longer. He's broken our bonds."

Lete seized Jupiter's hand. "Then you *are* the Wanderer. You weren't laughing at me back there in the cages. But why—"

"No time now," Jupiter said and plunged onto the ramp.

They ran down it wildly, crazily, reached the canal at the bottom.

"We'll have to—" Jupiter began, when Lete screamed.

"I can feel them!" the cave girl cried.

"They're trying to pull me back! Jupiter—"

She bit her lips, her cheeks suddenly bloodless. "They're gone," she said in a shaken voice. "They mustn't have guessed who I was."

Jupiter stared at her. Lete's yellow eyes were wide, frightened. She swallowed miserably.

"We'll have to get that Anolyn off your neck at the first opportunity," he said, turned to Tabak. "This canal leads to the Dra Dur. Is that right?"

"Yes," said Tabak in a queer voice; "but Jupiter—"

"What are our chances of getting through now?" he interrupted.

She shrugged slim white shoulders. "Every second we waste here lessens them."

Without another word, he started along the ledge paralleling the canal.

At regular intervals of about a block ramps led down to the aqueduct from the surface above. They crossed the mouths of other canals on narrow bridges. A perfect labyrinth of underground waterways stretched beneath the city.

At the fifth ramp, Jupiter heard a twang. Something whistled past his head. He almost lost his footing as he glanced up and

saw a dozen Nehogans on the ramp leading up to the street.

Lete spun around and tried to run, knocking Reilloc into the water with a splash. Tabak caught her, held the cave girl in spite of her terrified efforts to escape.

Jupiter dropped to one knee, changing the carbine to automatic, sent a burst of shots into the warriors above.

They didn't retreat, but with fierce yells charged straight into his gun. They were possessed, like Moros running amok. The last one was less than a yard away before he brought him down with a shot through the chest.

That had been close. He felt weak as he pulled Reilloc from the water.

"They know where we are," the giant Nehogan growled ominously, "our chances to—"

"Look out!" Tabak screamed.

Jupiter whirled around. He was just in time to see Lete run at him with Reilloc's sword. The cave girl had snatched it from the Nehogan's scabbard. Holding it like a lance, she flung herself on Jupiter, her face contorted with hate!

JUPITER jumped convulsively into the canal. His instinctive reaction was the only thing that saved him.

He broke water, saw that Reilloc had wrenched his sword away from the cave girl. He was holding her as she fought furiously to tear herself away, kicking, clawing at the Nehogan's face with her nails. She had gone utterly berserk. Jupiter was stunned.

Then he heard Tabak screaming: "Jupiter! Quick! It's the Anolyn! They've possession of her mind. Hurry!"

He scrambled desperately back on to the ledge.

"You've got to take that Anolyn from her neck! They know everything we do through her," Tabak cried wildly. "They've been in possession of her mind ever since we reached the canal. That's how they knew where to ambush us. Anywhere we go they'll be able to send men to intercept us."

Jupiter nodded grimly. As he prepared

the hypodermic of exsrocain, the Caligan girl pitched in and helped Reilloc pin Lete face down on the ledge.

Jupiter's fingers were shaking as he located a spot on Lete's naked back, plunged the needle between two of her vertebrae.

"One—two—three—four," he counted. Without bothering to test for consciousness he wrenched the little plum-colored shell from the cave girl's neck, smashed it against the wall of the aquaduct.

"Carry her!" he ordered Reilloc, and threw his instruments back into the pack, slipped a fresh drum of cartridges into the carbine. He could hear the thud of running feet on the ramp leading to the surface.

"Back!" he said tersely. "We'll have to try another way!"

For an hour they followed Tabak through the network of aquaducts, twisting, cutting down bisecting canals until Jupiter was exhausted. He and the big Nehogan had been carrying the unconscious wild girl by turns. Twice they saw Anolyn floating down to the sea like big purple squids. Jupiter shot them before they could telepath an alarm.

Tabak was in the lead when she stopped abruptly, put her hand to her mouth.

"What is it?" Jupiter hissed.

"The canal! Look!"

He raised his eyes. The tunnel came to a blind end just ahead. Then he saw that actually the roof dipped down beneath the surface.

"We've reached the seawall," Tabak said in a stricken voice. "I've never tried to leave the city by the canals, but I've heard that it was impossible. I'd forgotten—"

Jupiter seized her shoulders. "What do you mean?"

"They—they run entirely underwater for ever so far and come out beneath the Dra Dur. The Anolyn built them that way in order to keep the humans from escaping through them."

Jupiter swore in *Lingua Galactica*. "Suppose we go back to the streets. Can we reach the top of the wall? Does the sea come right up to its base?"

"Yes," Tabak said with a shiver.

Reilloc had stretched Lete out on the shelf. She was returning to consciousness,

Jupiter saw; and he stooped, splashing water from the canal into the cave girl's face. Her eyes opened groggily. She pushed herself to her elbows, stared about her with the quick, terrified look of a wild thing.

"You all right?" Jupiter asked.

She let her head drop. "Yes. I couldn't help it, Jupiter. I—"

"You'll do now," he said, not unkindly, and helped her to her feet. "Come on. We haven't any time to waste."

When they reached the surface, Jupiter saw that night had fallen, and with it a thick fog had rolled in from the Dra Dur, choking the streets solid. It was like wet lamb's wool pressing against his eyeballs.

They held hands to keep from becoming separated. Voices reached them out of the fog. Footsteps passed and faded away. At length they found a stair leading to the top of the sea wall, felt their way upward.

IT SEEMED like hours to Jupiter before they reached the top. He lay flat on his belly, felt for the edge. He could see nothing below, but a faint lap-lap of wavelets against the base of the wall came up to him.

"How deep is the water here?"

"D-deep enough," Tabak whispered in a frightened voice.

"All right, we'll jump."

Lete gasped. There was a startled, protesting growl from Reiloc.

"Jump blind, from here—from the top of the wall into the sea?" the Nehogan said. "Are you mad, Jupiter?"

"Can you think of any other way to escape?"

Tabak said in a queer, strained voice: "I'll jump. I'm not afraid—not too afraid."

Jupiter heard her move toward the edge of the wall. "No! Wait! I'll go first—"

But the Caligan girl had already leaped outward into the thick wet darkness.

Jupiter felt suddenly cold all over. He knew that he would never smell salt water again without recalling the horrible expectancy of that moment. Time stood still. Then far below they heard a splash!

"Tabak!" he called softly. He gave her time to rise to the surface. "Tabak!" He didn't dare lift his voice.

There was no answer. Just the monotonous lap of the water against the sea wall.

"God!" he thought. "She's hurt herself!" And he sprang outward into the encompassing blackness.

He seemed to fall for an eternity before he struck. It was like hitting a plank. The jar ran up his legs. He went down, down, half-dazed. Then he was clawing frantically to the surface.

He broke water. He could see nothing. It was like the bottom of a well.

"Tabak! Tabak! Where are you?"

His fingers touched something. It was the girl's shoulder. She was moving feebly, half-conscious. Treading water, he seized her, slid his arm across her chest, began to tow her away from the wall.

"Jump!" he called to Reiloc. "I've Tabak."

"By the Radiant God!" came the Nehogan's hoarse voice; "here I come!"

There was a splash, followed almost immediately by another, as the cave girl leaped also. The pair of them came up, blowing, unhurt.

"Which way?" Reiloc gasped.

"Follow the wall." Jupiter was trying to recall Tabak's memory patterns. "We're near the edge of the city, I think. There should be a beach just ahead."

They swam on, guiding themselves by the lap of water against the base of the wall. Jupiter, with his arm across Tabak's shoulder and breast, felt the girl shudder.

"Jupiter," she said weakly. "Jupiter, is that you?"

"Yes. Are you all right?"

"I—I think so. I can swim now."

All at once, he realized that the lapping of the water had changed to a faint, shushing sound.

"The beach!" he said.

Reiloc grunted. Lete didn't say anything. The wild girl swam like an otter, silent and alert. Jupiter touched bottom, helped Tabak up the beach, where they all flung themselves down in the warm sand.

A breeze had started up and was ripping the fog into wisps. A few stars glittered from the torn sky. The wall of the city loomed above them dark and threatening.

Tabak's fingers closed convulsively over Jupiter's hand.

"I'm afraid," she whispered. "It's so big and so empty out here. And there's no place where we can hide from them. They'll be after us in the morning with Nehogans and web-birds. They'll never let you go, Jupiter, never! They're afraid that you'll be able to unite the wild Kagans—"

"If we can only reach the ship," he muttered, and felt around in his pack for the metal tentacle that Reiloc had hacked from the Radiant God.

It was safe, thank the Lord, though it was only a fraction of the fuel he would need. The whole idol, that was what he must have. His eyes narrowed in the darkness.

The cave girl said in a nervous voice, "We must reach the jungle before daybreak."

He pulled himself to his feet. Lete took the lead, striking out for the invisible hills. She seemed to possess an instinct as unerring as a homing pigeon's. Every step, Jupiter realized, was taking him further and further from the source of his fuel.

DURING the next twelve days they dodged about the hills. Time after time they escaped discovery by the narrowest margin. Parties of Nehogans combed the jungle, while the web birds wheeled back and forth in the sky like observation planes. Nothing but Lete's junglecraft saved them.

On the thirteenth day they ran into a party of hunters from Lete's colony. The cave men were strongly thewed brutes, armed with spears and clubs, dressed in the skins of animals.

They were suspicious at first. But when Lete explained that Jupiter was the Wanderer-from-Beyond, they grew excited as children.

Jupiter had to demonstrate his lightning stick. That night they had a feast, and the cave men left at dawn to spread the word that the Wanderer-from-Beyond had actually appeared.

Two days later they reached the ship.

As Jupiter parted the last screen of leaves and saw the familiar hull of the Mizar, he had to bottle up his emotions

to keep from yelling and dancing a jig. He ran his hand fondly along the cool metal, caught Tabak watching him with a twinkle in her blue eyes. He took his hand away guiltily, started for the port.

It was then that Lete balked. The cave girl refused absolutely to enter the belly of the monster, as she put it. Nor did Reiloc look overjoyed at the prospect.

Jupiter was determined to drop like a fiery comet out of the night sky before the startled cave men. At length he consented to let Reiloc and Lete go ahead on foot to prepare the wild Kagans for his coming.

He and Tabak watched the pair disappear into the jungle, then he touched the button activating the lock.

Even as he did so there was a sudden swish overhead, and a shadow raced across the clearing. The Caligan girl screamed. From the corner of his eye, Jupiter saw a web-bird dropping out of the sky like a hawk!

He picked up Tabak, tossed her bodily through the port, tumbled in after her. He kicked the massive door shut not a second too soon. Racing up the ladder, he searched the sky through the transparent thermoplas blister.

It was an empty, hot blue bowl cupping the ship, the jungles and mountains. Then he saw the web-bird rise in sweeping spirals like an enormous buzzard.

A black speck appeared above the crest of a ridge. It was another of the ungainly creatures. It joined the first and the pair began to circle high in the sky above the ship. Three more flapped into his range of vision. They kept coming until at least fifty of the giant web-birds hung wheeling and dipping monotonously above the Mizar, but so far away they were little more than black specks.

VIII

HE WAS STILL STARING UP AT them when the Caligan girl climbed up into the control blister beside him.

"Can't you shoot them down?" she protested.

He shook his head.

"They stay out of range. I don't understand it. The way they act, you'd think

they knew just how close they could come."

"Of course they know!" Tabak bit her lip. "Jupiter, they're directed telepathically by the Anolyn, and the Anolyn picked your brain clean!"

He said: "Damn!"

"They—they can't get at us in here," Tabak asked, "can they?"

He shook his head. "We're safe enough as long as we stay inside. We could fly away, I suppose, but as soon as we came back they'd pick us up again. And I haven't enough fuel to waste any of it."

The Caligan girl brightened.

"At least we're giving Reiloc and Lete a better chance to get through. We've drawn off all the birds for miles around."

Jupiter nodded, broke open his pack. Tabak's blue eyes were alive with curiosity as she watched him feed the radio-active tentacle into the fuel hoppers, reset the alarms and check the instruments.

Tabak poked into every corner of the ship, "Oh-ed" and "ah-ed" with delight. She wanted to know about everything. But before Jupiter could tell her she would say, "This is Briggs' cabin, isn't it?" Or, "This is the galley," and laugh at his expression.

"Jupiter," she said soberly, with one of her quick shifts of mood. "Are—are you very fond of Lete?"

He raised his sandy eyebrows. "What made you ask that?"

"I don't want to see you hurt, Jupiter." Tabak grew more and more confused under his level stare. "You don't know the Kagans. They—they're promiscuous like animals. Lete would never understand your morals. She couldn't—"

Jupiter slapped his leg, burst into laughter.

"Good heavens, I'm not in love with her. Why, I'll be leaving Yogol as soon as I can get enough fuel. I couldn't take her with me anyway."

"Oh," said Tabak.

Jupiter's eyes suddenly widened.

"You were speaking *Lingua Galactica*!"

"Why not? I know it as well as you."

They were back in the control blister. She sank into an acceleration chair, smoothed the short black sarong over her legs, raised her eyes to his. A small frown drew her

brows together.

"Jupiter, what is love?"

"What did you say?" he asked, not sure that he'd heard her aright.

"Love. There's no such emotion among Yogolians. Sexual attraction, but not love."

What is it, Jupiter?"

He gave her a startled, baffled look.

"It—it's a romantic invention," he said, "to dress up the biological urge. It's something you feel for another person like hunger only not so tangible."

She nodded to herself. "That's what I thought, but I wasn't sure. Is it very strong, Jupiter?"

"It can be."

"What are the symptoms?"

He scratched his chin. "It hits different people different ways. You—you— Oh, hell," he said, "I don't know. What ever made you ask?"

"I've got it," she said in a stricken voice.

Jupiter sat bolt upright. "You mean you're in love?"

She nodded unhappily, stood up. "I think I want to be by myself." Availing her head, she walked quickly to the door and slipped out of sight down the ladder before Jupiter could recover from the shock.

"Hey!" he cried, springing to his feet; "where are you going?"

There was no answer. Then he heard the door of Briggs' cabin open and close. Suddenly his eyes widened. He dropped down the ladder, tried the door, but it was locked. "Tabak! Tabak!" he called, rapped on the panel, "Open up!"

"Go away," he heard her call in an unsteady voice; "please go away and leave me alone."

"Tabak, listen," he said. "You didn't mean me? You weren't talking about me when you said—" His voice trailed off. Confound it, that didn't sound at all the way he wanted it to.

There was something suspiciously like a sob from beyond the door.

"No!" Tabak said in a muffled voice.

"Of course not!"

Jupiter felt suddenly very foolish. Without another word, he turned on his heel, strode from the passage.

TWO days later the web-birds came—tiny black specks wheeling around and around in the sky like vultures drawn by carrion. Jupiter stood in the control blister and scowled up at them.

He was worried about Reiloc and the cave girl who should have returned yesterday. Maybe he'd better not wait any longer. He was turning away to call Tabak, when a wild clamor broke loose from stem to stern of the Mizar as the alarm bell began to ring. Jupiter's head jerked up! The black specks were plummeting Yogol-wards, diving like kingfishers.

Then he saw Lete break from the encircling jungle, sprint for the ship. The cave girl was alone. There was no sign of Reiloc anywhere.

Jupiter yelled down the tube to Tabak: "Open the port! Quick!"

He heard her gasp as he sprang for the keys that brought the needle gun into play.

It was a precision weapon, a fine, invisible ray of disruptive force. As the first of the web-birds dropped arrow-like into range, the ray touched it. The creature exploded like a fountain of spray. He got two more before the startled birds sheered off.

Snapping on the outside amplifiers, he yelled: "Lete!" His voice boomed through the loudspeaker—a giant's voice that stopped the cave girl dead in her tracks. "Lete! What's wrong?"

She stared upward in fright at the gleaming bullet-shaped monster.

"Quick, girl, speak up!"

"The Anolyn," she said in a small voice.

"What about them?"

"The Anolyn have sent a great army of Nehogans. Our men have seen them, less than a day's march from here."

"Get in the ship!" Jupiter commanded.

Lete began to tremble, but she was too frightened to disobey. She climbed meekly through the port. With a hollow "clang!" it shut behind her.

JUPITER blasted the starship off the ground with the jets. He couldn't use the inertialess stellar drive inside Yogol's gravitational field and the Mizar rocked sickeningly as it hurtled above the surface under rocket propulsion.

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Lete cowered in the shock absorber where Jupiter had buckled her down against her will. Her yellow eyes were glazed. She was like a wild animal in a trap.

Tabak was pale, but she stared eagerly through the transparent rind of the blister. Jupiter shot her an approving glance. He'd never realized how blue the Caligan girl's eyes were—cerulean blue, alive, dancing like a little girl's with a new doll.

"Take the scanner," he said gruffly. "You should know how it operates."

"May I? I'll be ever so careful."

She found it unhesitatingly, turned it on. The surface of Yogol sprang on the screen in three dimensional reality. Tabak gasped.

"I'm almost afraid I might fall into it!" Then she stiffened. "There they are! There! Look, Jupiter!"

He glanced into the screen. The valley widened out below, and he could see a great army of men camped on the level ground. Thousands of the copper skinned Nehogan warriors! They stood in excited clusters, staring upward, pointing at the Mizar with its comet tail of flame.

Jupiter could make out the striped tents of the Anolyn in the center of the encampment. He could see pink skinned Caligans and stolid porters. He turned to the terrified cave girl.

"What happened to Reiloc?"

Lete only moaned.

"Answer me!" he snapped. "Where's Reiloc?"

"He—he stayed at the cliffs to organize my people into an army. The tribes have been coming in for days. Ever since the word spread that the Wanderer has appeared. Reiloc said to tell you that he was going to split his forces, attack from both ends of the valley."

Jupiter swore under his breath. "We're going down," he told Tabak. "Going down fast. Hang onto your hair."

He put the Mizar into a tight spiral, drove her down like a blazing meteor. The star ship must have presented an awe-inspiring sight, jets shooting streamers of flame, her nose pointed directly at the cluster of striped tents in the center of the army.

Below him, the Nehogans scattered panic-stricken. The surface was rushing up at him like a gigantic expanding cannon ball. He cut in "George", buckled himself down frantically.

The Mizar seemed to explode as every available jet burst into life. A thunderous booming roar deafened him. Then the ship struck with a jar that almost shook loose his teeth.

He threw off the straps, dived for the control panel.

ASH covered the ground where the tents had been. At least half of the purple shelled octopods had been consumed instantly by the jets. The Anolyn who remained alive were scuttling for the protection of the jungle. Jupiter swung the needle gun into action.

The Nehogans had outstripped their slow-moving masters, who crawled like a cluster of frightened tortoises across the bare, flat land. The sides of the valley were alive with humans; they had fled that far and had turned to watch in frightened silence.

Jupiter concentrated on the Anolyn, picking them off one by one. Only a few seconds actually had elapsed since the Mizar had appeared over the horizon, and already less than a dozen of the terrified creatures were left, crawling desperately for the hills.

A sudden whisper of wings sounded overhead. Something like the shadow of a cloud raced across the flat land toward the cluster of fleeing octopods.

"The web-birds!" Tabak cried

Jupiter lifted his eyes, saw a flock of the ungainly creatures. There must have been nearly a hundred of them. They swooped down on their Anolyn masters, plucked the octopods from the ground with a furious beating of wings.

Jupiter's eyes widened in disbelief as the remaining Anolyn were borne to safety above the tree tops.

The Mizar was left all alone in the center of the valley.

Then to a man the frightened mob on the hillsides fell down on their faces, arms extended before them toward the ship e-

low, and a great babbling cry arose:

"The Wanderer! The Wanderer-from-Beyond!"

Tabak whirled away from the plastic rind.

"Jupiter! There comes Reiloc now! He must be warned, Jupiter! He doesn't know that the Anolyn have fled. He'll attack!"

At the head of the valley a mass of half-naked cavemen were streaming from the trees. They were a wild, undisciplined lot like an army of soldier ants on the march. Even from this distance, Jupiter recognized the giant figure of Reiloc striding at their head.

He swore in Lingua Galactica. "I can't afford to leave the ship just yet. Not until we know how that crazy Anolyn army's going to behave. The ship's our ace in the hole."

"I'll go," Tabak said, and darted for the well.

Jupiter watched her disappear down the ladder with a vague feeling of uneasiness. Then he turned back to the transparent rind. He caught sight of her again, running across the level ground toward Reiloc, waving her arms—a slim, blonde figure in the sarong, barefooted and barelegged. He swallowed disconsolately.

So, he thought, it must be Reiloc that she's crazy about. Reiloc!

He could see the giant Nehogan leave the cavemen, hurry toward the girl. They met on the level valley floor between the ship and the wild Kagans who were still debouching from among the trees.

Jupiter's blood ran suddenly cold. A flock of web-birds had appeared over the crest of the hill.

He leaped for the keys of the needle gun.

"Reiloc!" he yelled through the P. A. "Tabak! Watch out! The birds!"

He got three of the ungainly flying webs with the needle ray. Then he couldn't shoot any more.

"Oh, hell," he said.

The web-birds had dropped onto the pair in the open. Jupiter could see neither Reiloc nor Tabak. Only the monstrous fluttering of the creature's wings. Then the

7—Planet—Winter



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flock lifted slowly into the air bearing the Nehogan and the Caligan girl aloft. Jupiter didn't dare fire for fear of hitting either the one or the other.

They rose higher, higher, then straight as wild bees they lined out for the distant city by the Dra Dur.

Jupiter was beside himself with helpless rage and consternation. He couldn't chase them in the starship. It would be like attempting to follow a school of fish in an ocean liner.

He was stunned. He sank into an acceleration chair, while the web-birds with their human freight, became smaller and smaller in the distance.

DURING the days following the capture of Tabak and Reiloc, Jupiter was frantic. He couldn't rid his mind of the horrors that the fragile Caligan girl might be undergoing. The breeding stations, the biological laboratories, the inhuman orgies that took place in the city by the Dra Dur. Reiloc would be no better off, except that they might kill him outright instead of by degrees. Every hour's delay multiplied their danger.

Jupiter drove himself unmercifully, but there weren't enough hours for him to cram in all the things that had to be done.

He allowed the Kagans to retain their loose tribal organization. More tribes joined the march on the city by the Dra Dur every day. They were more like a migrating people than an army. They were bound together by only one common impulse—a desire to annihilate the Anolyn.

Lete was some help to Jupiter there. The cave girl acted as liaison officer between him and the Kagan chiefs. He was aware that she had risen to a position of eminence among her people—an Amazon chieftainess, a cave girl Joan of Arc.

Her rise to power suited him because it left him free to organize the Nehogan army.

They were his only trained body of men and they were useless so long as the parasites were fastened to their necks. The Anolyn could regain control of them, turn his own army against him.

Jupiter set himself to the impossible task of administering the exsocrain to the

Nehogan soldiers, the Caligan advisers, even the green skinned porters.

He made short hops in the star ship, setting up his camp ahead of the slow moving army. As soon as they began to stream in, he set to administering the drug. He trained a staff of Caligans, who were more adept at such things. He synthesized gallons of the stuff and taught them how to synthesize it.

And all the time he lived in perpetual dread of the Anolyn's next move.

Overhead the web-birds wheeled and dipped, at first hundreds, then thousands of the creatures as they drew closer to the city. They were the eyes of the Anolyn, he sensed. They followed the army like gulls following a ship.

On the seventeenth day they reached the broad plains surrounding the city by the Dra Dur, deployed before the towering walls and battlements.

The Nehogan general and Lete were closeted with Jupiter in the Mizar, laying their final plans, when a postern gate opened and a man left the city, made his way alone toward the lines of the invading army.

HE WAS a Caligan in a living, yellow furred boj and sandals. His eyes were peculiar—a glazed blue like enamelware. He made no move to escape or defend himself when the pickets grabbed him.

He said that he had a message for the Wanderer-from-Beyond from the Anolyn.

He was turned over to a Nehogan officer and brought before Jupiter in the Mizar.

One look at the man told Jupiter that he was possessed—that he was merely a vehicle through which some Anolyn inside the city was seeing, hearing, speaking, acting—

In an undertone he cautioned Lete and the Nehogan general not to mention their plans, turned to the Caligan envoy.

"What message do the Anolyn send?"

The Caligan stood like a man in a cataleptic trance, regarded Jupiter with fixed, unwinking attention.

"I am to inform you that the girl, Tabak, and the man, Reiloc, are unharmed."

Jupiter realized suddenly that his forehead was covered with sweat. He didn't interrupt.

The Caligan continued in that flat, unemotional voice:

"Unless you disband your army and send them away, the girl will be turned over to the long-tailed Begans to play with. If she survives the animal-men, which is doubtful, she will be sent to the biological laboratories for vivisection. Reiloc, of course, will be operated on immediately."

The Caligan paused. The control blister was still.

"In the event you agree to the Anolyn terms," the emissary went on, "both Tabak and Reiloc will be set free outside the city gates. You are to take them aboard your ship and leave Yogol forever."

"Post-hypnotic commands have been implanted in both their minds. If you return or attempt treachery, of any kind, they will kill you."

"You have until sunset to give us your decision."

The Caligan stopped talking.

Jupiter let his breath run out between his teeth. The orange sun was sinking into the Dra Dur. Lete's yellow eyes glittered. The Nehogan general opened his mouth to speak. But Jupiter stopped him with an imperative gesture.

"This is not something to be decided without thought," he told the unwinking emissary. "We'll give you our answer before daybreak." He turned to the guards. "Lock him in my cabin."

No sooner had the door closed on the Caligan envoy, than Lete sprang to her feet. She was clad in the fur of some jungle beast. A sword and dagger hung at her waist. She made Jupiter think of a savage Joan of Arc more than ever and he could feel his heart sink.

"There is but one answer," she flashed, "and that's to attack! Attack tonight before they can bring up reinforcements."

"This is the first time the Kagans have been united. Do they think we're foolish enough to throw away everything for the life of a man and a girl?"

Jupiter didn't say anything.



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The Nehogan general shook his head. He looked somewhat like Reiloc except that he was older, heavier.

"After all," he said, "many men will die during the battle. Is that any reason to abandon the fight? What's the life of two people against the whole world? I don't understand it. The Anolyn must be very desperate to offer such terms. It is a trick, maybe."

"No," said Jupiter. "No, I don't think it's a trick." But he knew that it would be impossible to explain his feelings either to the cave girl or the Nehogan general. Such sentimentality was foreign to their natures. If he attempted to dissuade them from their purpose, they would go ahead in spite of him. And he couldn't blame them.

He said: "We'll attack at sun-up."

"But why wait until then?" Lete demanded hotly, "When the Anolyn will be expecting us?"

"To give me time to get inside and open the gate," he told her.

"You can get inside the city?" the Nehogan general asked incredulously. "Undetected?"

"I think so. It's worth a try."

"Yes," said the general grimly, "if you can get the gate open it may mean the difference between victory and defeat. When will you start?"

Jupiter was staring at the spires and steeples of the city by the Dra Dur, bathed in the angry orange rays of the setting sun.

"One hour after dark," he said.

IX

JUPITER DISMOUNTED THE needle ray. It never had been intended to serve as a hand weapon. It was like carrying a fifty millimeter anti-aircraft gun, but on this planet of mild gravity he was able to handle it well enough.

He encased it carefully in waterproof wrappings. Then he broke out a space-suit.

Sun up. The order was to attack at sun up! It didn't give him much time.

The Yogolians knew nothing about reducing a fortified city, but they had cut timbers for scaling ladders. The cavemen could run up them like monkeys. They

should carry the walls by sheer numbers.

Lete and the Nehogan general watched him curiously as he donned the spacesuit. He picked up the unwieldy gun, started through the soft black night for the city.

They went along with him discussing their plans. He answered in grunts, his voice harshly metallic coming through the diaphragm. At the front lines he left them behind and went on alone across the level plain like a robot in the cumbersome suit.

The impulse to run was almost uncontrollable. Suppose the Anolyn were suspicious. They might have been bluffing. Tabak and Reiloc might already be dead. He began to sweat.

He plodded on steadily through soft, plowed land. He reached a pasture and a herd of the long-tailed Begans ran up sniffing him curiously. The black, hairy men followed him, grunting, among themselves, to the opposite fence where they stopped. They had been trained not to climb fences.

All at once he realized that he had come to the beach. The walls of the city loomed darkly massive above him. Stars twinkled in the velvet sky.

He waded out into the water. The stars vanished as the Dra Dur closed above his helmet. He snapped on his torch.

The light drove a lance through water ahead, revealing the sandy bottom, strange submarine creatures. He struggled on and on, the pitch of the sea floor becoming steeper. It was like a fairyland of grottoes and trailing seaweed. Then the rays from his torch struck the gaping mouth of a cave.

Only it wasn't a cave at all. It was more like a tunnel—a tunnel that the ancients had driven through the mountains.

Jupiter felt his heart leap into his throat. It was what he had been searching for—the mouth of one of the canals leading beneath the city by the Dra Dur.

He turned into it, his light revealing smooth composition walls, green and slick with algae. He must have gone a mile before he found a ramp leading to the surface.

As his helmet broke water, he saw that his luck was still holding. He was beneath the temple of the Radiant God. The ramp

which continued on up into the temple proper was deserted.

He sat down, unwrapped the needle gun, then started up the ramp like some amphibious monster of the deep. Tabak and Reilloc, he was sure, were being confined in the temple. The breeding pens more than likely, since that was where most of the human guinea pigs were confined.

He didn't encounter a single Anolyn until he reached the central courtyard.

The courtyard was divided into runs like a dog kennel. It was dark with a pitch-like blackness. He hastily shut the air intake valve on the spacesuit. The stench was terrible. He could hear grunts, soft voices. Someplace in the darkness a girl was crying.

Jupiter was revolted to the depths of his being. When he thought of Tabak being shut up here, he could feel his blood run cold.

How was he going to find her in this mess? He didn't dare use the torch and time was running out.

Overhead the stars were paling. A light appeared diagonally across the courtyard. He flattened himself against the wall.

IT WAS a torch, he saw, in the hand of a pink skinned Caligan. A dozen grotesque Anolyn followed the torch bearer, then a company of Nehogans. Jupiter watched them make their way between the runs.

His eyes suddenly narrowed. They had stopped before a cage in which he could see a girl.

The door was opened, the girl dragged out, hustled toward a pen of long tailed Begans. The smoky light of the torch glared briefly on her face.

Tabak! They had taken away the girl's sarong, caged her like a wild animal.

Jupiter swung up the needle ray. He could see them leading Reilloc from the next cage.

He yelled: "Tabak! Reilloc! To me!" and flicked on the ray gun.

The disruptive beam of force touched one of the guards. There was a brief, brilliant flash. Then another and another as the ray fingered guard after guard.

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The yard went from light to dark to light again, freezing the action. Jupiter saw Tabak break away, sprint toward him down the corridor between the runs. Reiloc was directly behind her. The giant Nehogan had snatched a sword from one of the guards whom Jupiter had rayed down. He brandished it over his head, yelled savagely.

More Nehogans poured into the courtyard, summoned telepathically by the Anolyn. Then Reiloc and Tabak were crowding beside him.

"The city gates!" Jupiter barked. "We've got to reach them before dawn!"

"This way," Tabak cried. She plunged into a passage leading from the court.

"Not so fast," Jupiter grunted. "I can't keep up in this damned suit."

The Caligan girl slowed down. Behind them the pandemonium from the breeding pens became fainter and died away. Reiloc, pounding along at Jupiter's elbow, said:

"Has the city been attacked?"

"No. Sun up. We've got to open the main gate."

They burst from the temple into the street. The guard at the entrance was caught flatfooted. Reiloc laid him out with a blow of his sword, and they ran on down a strangely deserted street.

"Where's everybody?" Jupiter panted. Tabak said over her shoulder. "There's only a skeleton force in the city. Most of the Nehogans were in the army they sent after us."

Red was streaking the East, when they reached the gate. It was guarded by a lone Anolyn and a dozen Caligans.

Jupiter rayed the octopod and the Caligans scattered like frightened birds. Reiloc started the mechanism that rolled back the massive, circular gate. No one tried to stop them.

Jupiter continued to wait tensely, covering the street with the needle ray. He was still waiting when the advance body of the encircling Nehogan army poured through the entrance.

He stood there—a scowl on his lean brown face as the Nehogans continued to trot into the city. They were veterans. They fanned up the streets, searched the buildings as they went. There were a

few sharp clashes, but that was all.

In less than an hour, the city by the *Dra Dur* had fallen.

The Anolyn had retreated silently into the sea from whence they had arisen.

AS THE last chunk of the Radiant God went into the fuel hoppers aboard the Mizar, Jupiter realized that there was nothing left to hold him on the planet.

The Yogolians were busy organizing themselves into a cohesive people. Outside the city walls, the horde was camped. Lete was high in the council of chiefs and an expedition was being planned against a second town further up the coast.

They were a resilient race, these Yogolians. Now that they had the means to combat the Anolyn, it wouldn't be long before the last of the octopods were driven back into the *Dra Dur*. They didn't need him any more.

Jupiter climbed the ladder to the control blister. It was night, the bluish pallor of the riding lights illuminating the instruments. All about him rose the dark spires of the city by the *Dra Dur*.

He stared upward through the blister. The huge, dark nebula seemed to cut a hole in space.

He felt a tingle in his nerve ends. He was sure Earth lay on the other side of that hundred-and-twenty-light-year long stretch of blackness. A sudden wave of homesickness gripped him.

Why not blast off now—this minute?

He could feel his heart pump a little faster. The ship was fueled up, ready to go. He had told Reiloc only a little while ago that he might leave any time—tonight even.

He hadn't seen Tabak since the fall of the city. He had tried to find her, asking questions of everyone, but nobody seemed to know anything about her. The Caligan girl obviously was avoiding him.

Jupiter swore under his breath. His fingers touched the controls. Flame rumbled suddenly in the jets, rebounded in orange billows past the blister.

As soon as Jupiter was beyond Yogol's gravitational field, he switched to the inertialess stellar drive, turned the ship over

to "George". He leaned back in his seat. It was good to feel the weightless buoyancy of deep space again.

Someone said: "Dinner is being served in the galley, sir!"

Jupiter shot out of his chair, banged his shoulder against the overhead, forgetting all about his lack of weight. He rebounded helplessly to the deck, squirmed around.

"Tabak!" he gasped.

The Caligan girl stood beside the ladder leading below. She was dressed in Brigg's olive-green uniform, her eyes dancing.

"But I thought you'd gone away!"

Her face softened. "I couldn't. It's too strong for me, Jupiter. I've been in Brigg's cabin all the time. I knew that was one place you'd never go."

He said: "Then it was me?" his eyes slowly kindling.

Tabak nodded.

Jupiter shoved off from the back of the shock absorber, grabbed the girl in his arms. "You're crazy," he said, "you didn't have to stow away."

"But you said you wouldn't take anybody with you when you left."

The tube began to buzz angrily; the red light winked on. Jupiter stiffened.

"Who's that?"

Then Reilock's voice sounded in the communicator.

"Will you come down here and show me how to eat?" he demanded in an aggrieved voice. "My coffee is floating in a ball around the ceiling!"

Tabak giggled.

Jupiter couldn't believe it. He said, "Who else is aboard?"

"No one. Just Reilock and me. You're not angry, are you? He was wild to come. I never could have stayed hidden if it hadn't been for him. He brought me food and—"

"You mean he knew, where you were all the time?"

"Yes," she said meekly.

"Are you coming down?" Reilock belatedly; "or must I starve?"

"Go ahead and starve," said Jupiter. "we're busy."



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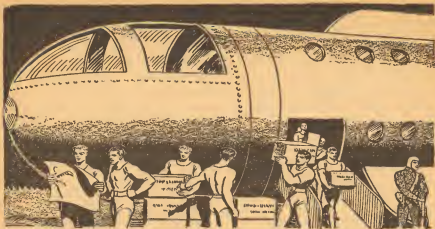
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THE VIZIGRAPH

GREETINGS, boys and girls, as we settle down to another Kaffeeklatsch on the previous issue. Bunch of interesting letters below, so this poor character will retire in short order.

But first we have a tale to tell. When Al Coppel sent us the story, **FLIGHT FROM TIME**, in this issue, he told us of an interesting experiment he conducted to test the idea in the piece. He shut himself up in a dark closet with the intention of staying there one full hour, as near as he could guess it. He neglects to say how comfortable he made himself, but he did make every possible allowance for error. When he was sure the hour was up, he came out. The clock told him he'd been in there exactly twenty-five minutes! He also fails to tell us how much he aged in that closet. . . .

We don't want to precipitate an epidemic of fen locking themselves up, to the distress of their loved ones—and creditors. We shudder to think of the man-hours frittered away. But we'd like to hear some results—

Who, me? Stay in a stuffy closet? You crazy? Well, anyway, there's another fascinating little project for you (who have nothing better to do than dance attendance on some fool editor's whims) and that is to define science fiction. We have our own definition, but we'll pretend we haven't and we'll sit back and smile our slow maddening smile while you humbly offer your own sweated-out definitions. Let's see 'em!

Who won the pix? Bob Bradley, they liked your effort best; pick one. Virginia Shawl, you're next; pick two. Rad Nelson, pick three.

Now just a second, while I slip into my flak suit . . . Okay—shoot!

—PLANET'S LINT-HEADED PTERODACTYL.

PLANET REGRETS!

The Erik Fennel story scheduled for this issue, and mentioned on the cover, was squeezed out at the last minute. It will be run soon.

WANTS TO CHEER NEW WRITERS

201 Veterans Village
Canton, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

Congratulations on the results of the Vizigraph poll. Of course the issue is not settled and may never be settled permanently. But it is definitely worthwhile to bring such considerations occasionally before the reading and writing public. The chief answer that seems to have come from the poll is that if we want the Vizigraph we will have to deserve it by writing well-considered letters about what we like or don't like and why. I am especially glad to see that the authors of your stories consider the Vizigraph worth their attention, whether or not they like all of it.

Action on Azura and *The Giants' Return* in the Fall Issue were excellent stories. Both plots were clear and the action rapid-moving and well handled. Sometimes it's hard to say more even about good stories, except that these two were obviously not part of an old inventory that had to be got rid of.

There is, however, one matter on which I seek enlightenment. That is the subject of pen names. Every fourth or fifth letter in the Vizi seems to imply that this author is really that author, till I am quite baffled. I have no wish to pierce the identity of any particular author, but I should like to know about how many different authors have their work printed in **PLANET** during a year. Eighteen of the twenty-three authors publishing in **PLANET** during this last year were represented by only one story. Some of these stories were excellent, like *Peril Orbit* by Wedlake and *Action on Azura* by Osborne. A few of these one-story-this-year authors I can recognize as old-timers of established rep, but I should like to have some indication when one of the stories in an issue is by a real newcomer, so that I could throw a few words of special encouragement his way if the story merits it. Now that continual references in

the Vizi arouse my suspicions that one-half of the writers are really the other half as well, my zeal is damped and I have a regrettable tendency just to read 'em up and throw 'em out. (Not that I have ever thrown away a copy of PLANET).

I don't mean to say that I judge a story entirely by its author, but I should like some indication as to whether it is uninspired hackery that makes the bad ones bad or whether it is the early mistakes of an author who, with a little friendly needling will give me some truly enjoyable hours' reading.

Most hopefully,

ELIZABETH M. CURTIS

Only pen-names used in past year—to our knowledge—were Roger Dee and A. Bertram Chandler; Emmett McDowell and Alfred Coppel are also pen-names, but really are only changes rung on their given names. In each case, only one pen-name is used. In one case, however, author used his given name on another story.—Ed.

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DEAR PUNDIT:

I sprang from my bed. I looked out a window. Gasp. I looked out two windows. Gasp. Gasp. Uggie. A man approached. He was dressed in armor. He carried a flame thrower with which he seared the ground in front of him. I prepared myself. I got into my own suit of armor. I went down the front steps at whose said bottom the man was waiting. He bathed me in flame. Then, seeing that I was pure, he handed me a bulky white object. A letter. I took it, and he turned about to go. He went a few steps, half turned, then collapsed, a half throated gurgle wiggling in his throat. "A fan letter," he mouthed, then died. It was so. I opened the letter.

IT was here. It said so in the letter. IT was here. I fainted. When I came to, I thot wildly. IT was on the stands. I'll have to go. Quickly I jumped on my beastie-beast and rode off madly in all directions. When I approached the stand there was a woman there. She was expendable. She reached into the strong room, removed a faintly writhing object. Once she gazed at it, then turned away, half her face missing. With one convulsive shrug, she tossed it to me and I caught it. Before I passed out I saw her go down—literally disintegrating—dead. She was expendable. Her duty had been fulfilled. I had IT.

They carried me home—left me on the doorsteps, IT clasped in my grasp, firmly tied down. Several weeks later, protected by goodle rays, I sat in my inner sanctum, reading IT.

The cover—whew!!! A femme baring her teeth—a hero baring his teeth—and a multiple-headed dragon—baring its/their teeth. The lady was bare in—but let us go on to other places, I mean things. Why is the lady cross-eyed? (She is not cross-eyed; you are—Ed.) Is it the hero? You can't see all his face . . . maybe that's the reason.

What is that in the background? Do I find a picture of Ye Ed? It is blue, you know. (I'm magenta.—Ed.)

Enchantress of Venus was better than the last

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Stark story, but for some reason they just don't seem to appeal to me; maybe it's because the hero falls in love with every female that comes along. The poor guy must get pretty tired.

Action on *Asura* was the best of the ish. If it didn't say Richardson Osborne, I'd strongly suspect it was committed by Eric Frank Russell. Hmmm, Mr. Editor? (See Curtis letter, above.—Ed.)

The *Giants Return* was fine—but for some reason or other I can't help but sympathize with those orful little guys. The only other one worth mention was *The Wheel Is Death*, and it seems to be more realistic. Seems to me there really ought to be some sort of "status quo" that could be adopted, but not necessarily one so way down in technology.

The V was, as usual, the best feature of the mag, and in case that majority swings—here's another vote from me for the Vizi!—and thanks for printing my letter. Hah! Think of doing away with la Vizi—if you did that I'd write to the other reader of this mag and tell him to stop buying—then you'd go out of business . . . ha. (You forget my many relatives.—Ed.)

Surely you can do better than Pundit? Are you slipping? Or are you intoxicated? According to Ripley—pardon, the ex-Ripley—it means "shot with a poisoned arrow." Of course then you'd be dead, and that might explain a few things.

In re originals: Nelson; Shawl; and Wood, in the order named.

A fan demented in places,

PHIL WAGGONER

ATTENTION, DRUG ADDICTS

1711 Davidson Avenue
New York 53, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

I don't want any pictures so I won't bother telling you about the plastic-faced one-eyed goons I had to fight off to get my copy of PS. Let it suffice to say that I just walked into the local store, dropped my two dimes and took the maize colored blonde away.

My purpose in writing this is just to say that I want the Vizigraph to continue, why I desire said condition and a few other comments about your magazines.

Although many readers don't care too much either way about the continuance or discontinuance of the feature, I believe it adds an interesting touch of hilarity and sometimes sound criticism (sometimes!). It serves as a sounding board for controversial stories and topics and sometimes develops amusing themes. However, I think the reason Mr. Hall raised the issue of dropping it is because you are letting the department get out of hand in a wild 'n woolly sort of way. Many of the letters of the last few years seem to have been written by drug addicts, morons or just plain nuts who seem to want to have their name in print (and get a pic). Of course, this doesn't mean that all the commentaries were of this sort. Some were extremely stimulating—but to me the majority weren't worth reading. Reading reams of the same drivel about ". . . here's how I got the last issue!" and ". . . I think the best story was . . ." aren't my idea of a pleasant evening in and don't seem

to have a valid purpose in the magazine. Another thing that I think depreciates the value of the column is that too often it becomes a correspondence corner among its patronizers. Perhaps, if you would award the pictures on a basis of sound, constructive and interesting letters, and not drivel all critics would drop their arms. In this line I think shortening the column (and some of the masterpieces in it) would aid. But that's just my side of the fence.

A few more comments on some of the letters and the magazine and I'll crawl back into my lair. For interest not up to the point of the ridiculous I liked the letters of (1) Virginia Shawl (very much!) (2) Robert Rivennes and (3) Edwin Sigler.

Mr. Bradley you are very right!

. . . How about that suggestion of Frank Graves, Ed? (*It's Groves*, and I'm afraid we can't afford the space.—Ed.)

. . . And still no smooth edges. Tsk! Tsk!

Very sincerely yours,

MITCHELL M. BADLER

BEM IN A GILDED CAGE

232 James Street
Perth, Western Australia

DEAR PAUL:

Once upon a time, a long time ago, (ain't it funny how nothing happens these days?) I sat down and wrote La Vizi a fan letter. It was the perfect epistle, the fan letter to end all fan letters, the fan letter which would have sent Oliver, a crushed and broken figure, to the nearest bridge to do a Steve Brodie. (That is, if they have bridges in Texas.) Having despatched this letter to you per rocket ship, I sat back, a supercilious smile tugging at the corners of my cynical mouth, and waited for the three illos to arrive. Idly, I wondered which illos Payne would select for me, because being so far away from N'Yok (Martian for New York) I felt it would be impracticable to hold things up waiting for me to pick 'em myself. (*Three? Select? Roger, you never get but one, which you select yourself.—Ed.*) Time Marched On, and the illos failed to arrive. A faint sense of uneasiness began to agitate me. Surely, surely, Payne could not have failed to print my letter in La Vizi? Gad, sir, incredible as it might seem, that is exactly what you have done! Don't you think, as one of the only two known fans in the entire state of Western Australia, that I have some standing in the field? Particularly, as the other West Aussie fan never has, and has no intention of, writing a fan letter? Doesn't that give me sort of stature? If it doesn't, I'll buy me a pair of built up shoes. Come, sir, let us have no more nonsense, print this letter without delay, and forward the necessary illustrations, at your earliest convenience.

. . . Anybody who has read PS for a few years, is struck with the most amazing circumstance. In most publications, the magazine stands or falls upon the strength of the lead novels, and the shorts are usually back stuff thrown in to fill up space. Now the really amazing thing about PS, is that the lead novels and novelettes are usually quite trivial, entertaining, yes, but stuff that is quickly forgotten. ALL OF YOUR REALLY GREAT STORIES HAVE BEEN

SHORTS. And among the really great array of short stories which have appeared in PS, two stand out, Chester Geier's "Planet of Creation" and Ray Bradbury's unforgettable "Mars is Heaven!" Of course, to quote an obscure and unimportant fan named Chad Oliver, "Bradbury is science-fantasy's white haired boy" (Unquote) . . .

Getting onto the vexed question of your covers—personally I like undressed (drool) dolls (leer) on your covers. But try and keep them out of the stories, it's a well known fact that women louse up any stories they appear in, other than those which appear in "Lurid Confessions" (It's all right, Payne, stop frothing at the mouth, there's no such magazine.) Don't get me wrong, I'm no misogynist, in fact I have to be held down by force whenever I see Rita Hayworth in the movies. Actually though, there are only three kinds of dames I like, blondes, brunettes and red heads. I'm hard to please. But I repeat, keep the wenches out of the stories.

Sneary may sneer, Kennedy may kackle, and Payne may protest, but I am going to end this letter with a piece of poetry, to wit:

It was only a BEM in a gilded cage,
But nothing could stop its frightful rage,
When it saw its green eyed sweetheart,
Sold as a slave in the Martian mart.
It burst out the cage, with a ghastly roar,
The Martians fled thru the nearest door,
It strangled the dame right there and then,
(She'd crossed him for another BEM.)

Well, I must end this letter now, as the white coated men have just arrived with my strait jacket. I'll be seeing ya.

Fantastically yours,

ROGER N. DARD.

(The trouble with running a foreign fan letter is that it holds up the pic awards. Takes 'em an age to get the issue, and another age for the next issue announcing the winners.—Ed.)

SEX A TOUCHY SUBJECT?

1618 McFarland Avenue
Gastonia, N. C.

DEAR PAUL:

At first, the typer wouldn't work, so I called in my wife who fixed it with a bobby pin. Then, my ribbon was too dim, so I poured kerosene on it. Then, when I started to type, I made fourteen typographical errors in the first paragraph. (Not counting the errors of ignorance.) So I ripped the page out and here I am again, trying to get a couple of pages of comment on the Fall PLANET before my keepers arrive. . . .

Who dreamed up the new heading for Viz? (Doofin—Ed.) It is nice! And, since we are in the Vizigraph, here is my vote on the letters: 1. Robert A. Bradley, 2. Radell F. Nelson, 3. Phil Waggoner. All had nice letters and the choice as to sequence was a difficult one.

Leigh Brackett's novel was a superb job. For my money, she outshines her illustrious husband when it comes to turning out a space yarn. (And Edmond Hamilton is no slouch at a typewriter!) The other stories were well above average, too. Sex in magazine fiction is always a touchy



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subject. It seems that some people refuse to acknowledge the facts of life and refuse to believe the teachings of Freud and Jung—that sex is the motivation behind all human endeavor. They also overlook the fact that sex is responsible for life itself.

To these "purists," the word "sex" is a naughty word, and never used in polite society. Maybe I am naughty and perverted, but I like a tinge of sex. It tends to add realism to literature. And who is there to say STF isn't literature? Of course, I wouldn't go for out-and-out pornography. But the smattering of sex occasionally used in PLANET wins my whole-hearted nod of approval.

I hope of Doc Smith takes the hint and does you one of his space-operas. Not of the type that he has recently done in another magazine, but a rousing epic of space, with drinkin', swearin', lovin' spacemen. Of men who fight and drink on their feet, who go to space with a song on their lips and a blaster-gun on their hips . . . of the days before the superliners blasted their way to the stars and a trip to either of the closer planets was one fraught with danger and thrills and wild adventure! Man, what a yarn!

"Sing me a song of the star-ways
of men of yore who were bold. . .
Who blasted their way through the vacuum,
in search of women and gold.

"Tell me a story of spacemen
Who blasted in ships shining bright
and were seldom true to their women
But were often a little bit tight.

"Sing me a song of the star-ways,
of days that will come no more.
For I am a man who is happiest
when reliving the glories of yore."

O.K., so it's poor poetry. But I had to fill up this page.

Sincerely,

WILKIE CONNER

MORONS, BUT HIGH GRADE

Montsweag, Maine

DEAR EDITOR:

Re the Vizigraph dispute. . .

Who buys PLANET? Morons and crazy people, that's who. The morons just read the darn thing while chewing bubble gum, and the nuts write fan letters. (Pardon me, I gotta go get some more bubble gum. . .)

If these nuts don't have some . . . (where's that fancy writin' book I got for Freshman comp?) some socially acceptable (?) sublimation of their exhibitionist drives, if they are caught, stifled, repressed without any means of setting before the world their pitiful cries of defiance, their last slender grip on sanity will give way and something will crack. . . (Crack! That was a big bubble. Bubble gum is an art.)

Throw out all the stories, (no, don't throw out Brackett, get more Brackett), throw out . . . (no, don't throw out Osborne, *Action on Asura* was swell) o.k., keep all the stories, get more stories, come out once a week, but KEEP THE VIZI-GRAPH!

Now a few suggestions for improving science

fiction in general:

1. Will somebody (Brackett, Guth, Sloan, Copel take note) take into consideration the fact that those fuzzy clouds around Venus consist of formaldehyde vapor at a temperature of 330° Centigrade, (Journal of Astrophysics, October, 1946)? Makes it hot and stuffy down there.

2. What makes antigravity work? $G = \frac{M M'}{K D^2}$

Where ya gonna dig up negative mass, or is K the diagravitic constant, negative, hmmm? (And no foolishness about negative matter; everybody knows positrons are only bubbles in Dirac's Ocean!)

3. No racial stereotypes, please. In fact, no stereotypes. Use people instead.

4. Gaaa, those lousy covers.

Don't forget you got a real high class audience of us morons reading PLANET, even tho we don't write in (can't write?) and we want to see PLANET right up top, with, uh, like, maybe, Shakespeare.

Yours,

MARGARET GARDINER

DEFINE STF, SOMEBODY!

Lubbock, Texas,
June 5th, 1949

DEAR EDITOR:

So the poll says to keep La Viz. But why the percentages and not the numerical totals? (*Still coming in.—Ed.*) Perhaps the opposition voted several times each. Next time why not print a ballot form to be mailed back?

Several years ago an atavist from Denver (F. J. Bartlett, if I remember right) wrote a letter of the Hall type that set off one of the worst feuds in La Viz's bloody history. The fans, led by the great Milt Lesser of Brooklyn, came out in mass, using an acid-drenched vocabulary that left little unsaid about anything. At least in those days the fans had opinions, and stated them with fire and vitality. (*Where were you during the race riot?—Ed.*) If this be progress . . .

This new ish in general is just "So what." Rodney Palmer has a cute idea, but it wouldn't work. I mean about running a poll on story preferences. All the stories are made up of varying degrees of the same elements; different plots (if any) require different handling, and who gives a damn about the author as long as the story is good? Probably every fan would want something different, and by the time you got a composite picture of Joe Fan's likes and dislikes, it would probably be quite meaningless. (*Well, not quite, but it's certainly tough to figure out.—Ed.*)

However, a poll along these lines might put an end to the business of using Mars and 2,000 A.D. as a background for a Western or Gushy Love story and calling the resulting mess STFiction. Altogether too many writers try that—and seem to get away with it. Maybe somebody should define "STFiction." (*All right, gang, one . . . two . . . three . . .—Ed.*) And solve a few other major problems—

I don't know what Mr. Palmer classifies as "heavy science and math," but, whatever it is, I'm in favor of it. But this would make it necessary for the authors to predict what research will turn up, and the application that society will make of

the future discoveries. Which of course is what STF is all about anyhow. I assume a "heavy science" story would show the twists present day science would go through to make the assumptions of the technology involved possible. I am all for that, as too many writers dream up super gadgets like time machines and superlight speeds without giving any idea of how they work. Of course, if anybody could build a time machine or a transdimensional rocket, he would probably be building same and not writing . . .

While on the subject of STFiction writers and their creations, one thing that I could never comprehend is why so many stories allude to theology in one way or another. Of course, when used in connection with social or psychological ideas, that is one thing. But when used in any supernatural or prophetic or supreme sense, that is something very much else. It is OK to have the characters in the story religious or superstitious or just plain stupid, but when it comes to mixing the scientific thesis with religion, it doesn't make sense. Page 34 of the Fall Issue is a good example of the latter. Why was that particular knowledge "From the land of the Gods beyond the sky" unquote? Once a supernatural factor is assumed, the whole thing becomes meaningless.

Perhaps we should not blame the writers too much for using the deus ex machina theory. It probably comes in handy when they want to explain something they don't understand. But it does spoil the story, no matter how good it may be otherwise.

When it comes to religion, I'd just as soon accept Charles Fort's "Property" idea as any religion I know anything about. In fact both ideas would mean about the same. What I can't understand is that a so-called scientific civilization as we have in America still professes some religion by a top-heavy majority. (*Consult U. S. Census, volume on Religious Bodies.—Ed.*) About three years ago The American Weekly ran a series of Articles entitled "My Faith" by some of the leading men of science. Dr. Einstein was among them, as was Dr. Millikan. Frankly, I don't get it. Religion in the Einstein Universe looks like double talk—only more so.

Anyhow, I believe it would be a better world if we had more science and less religion. That might be a little rough on the psychology racket and a few STF writers, but it would no doubt be in the interest of progress.

Sincerely,

LEWIS SHERLOCK

OUR HACKS BEST

119 Ward Road
N. Tonawanda, New York

DEAR PLP:

Looking at it one way, it could be said that this issue of PLANET (Fall) surprised me. Though looking at it the opposite way, it could also be said that PLANET did not surprise me. Personally, I would prefer not to look at it at all. The PLANET cover, I mean. IT DIDN'T ILLUSTRATE THE STORY. Look at it (I can't). Now you see—you . . . Holy were-cats and leapin' Venusian Lost Ones! It does! What is

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RAY BRADBURY RETURNS!



IN THE NEXT ISSUE!

PLANET coming to? How dare your cover illustrate a story! All the science-fiction tradition, gone—destroyed by a mere flick of the paint brush—lost forever. Oh, well, I suppose an artist had to hit upon a picture that would follow a story just by the laws of chance—even though they *don't* read the story. (They don't, do they?)

Enchantress of Venus automatically slips into first place, by three laps ahead of *Action on Aswra*. It also automatically places Leigh Brackett fourth upon my list of authors—no, wait a minute, I'll make that third. Will Jenkins (in another publication—come, come, now; you must face it. Don't cry. Hold your head up like a brave little BEM. There—steady, now—there are other science-fiction publications) (*NO! NO! NO!*—Ed.) has slipped.

I agree with Rodney Palmer: Brackett's work is undeniably like that of Burroughs'. Not, I believe, in style, but in the mood she creates. (Burroughs, by the way, is my favorite writer.) Oddly, her style is akin to that of Bradbury (my second favorite author); I say oddly, because I see no similarity in the styles of Bradbury and Burroughs.

I guess her character, Stark, is here to stay. Now, I have a question I'd like to have you answer when (?) you print this. Did Miss (?) (*Married*—Ed.) Brackett write any stories about Stark before she left science-fiction-writing 'way back when I wasn't reading (anything, probably)? (*See Ed Cox's letter, below*—Ed.) If so, what are the titles, and in what issues did they appear (I want to get them, if any)? If she didn't, here is a request—two requests. First, have her continue the series, as she can have him as a hero on any planet she chooses, without detracting from the story value—in fact, it would enhance the story. Second, if N'Chaka is a new

character, how about a story (book-length novel, huh?) about his early childhood. I doubt whether the fen will accuse her of pirating Burroughs' work. I'd like to read about the adventures of Stark in his youth in Mercury, and about the incidents of which she has but hinted in her latest stories.

The novelette, second, was also very good; the theme is not particularly new, but heretofore I have only seen it in ***** (*You did it again! You named a competitor!*—Ed.) I was glad to see it in PLANET.

Among the shorts, since Bradbury was absent (second time running), only one was really worthy of mention: *The Giants Return*. This, too, has been done, in various ways, in the past—but it was handled nicely and the ending, though highly improbable, was very nice and—er—happy.

The others were all fair PLANET shorts, which is definitely not an insult.

And now LA VIZI.

I was overjoyed to see that a clear majority of readers want LV; I, you will notice, was one of them. Even though you print my epistles, I will probably never get an original, but LA VIZI is probably still the best letter column in fandom. You realize, of course, that most of PLANET is not really science-fiction; or rather, it is the science-fiction of yesteryear; the hack of today. (Except for such noble exceptions as Brackett and Bradbury.) But, unlike—and—(*Stop it!*—Ed.) which also print hack, PLANET's hack is stimulating, invigorating—a pleasant change from the good science-fiction, while the former (s) print unspeakably horrible trash. So hurrah for PLANET, and especially hurrah for LA VIZI. I would not have any of the other letter columns changed to something remotely resembling LA VIZI, but just as certainly I would not have LA VIZI taken away. I said before that LA VIZI is probably the best letter column in fandom; I will retract that "probably"; it is. . . .

ORIGINALLY (Hint),

W. PAUL GANLEY

Post Scriptum: You will notice, PLP, that I have carefully refrained from mentioning that PLANET STORIES' cover is a good substitute for soapy water, etc., when someone has swallowed arsenic; it makes them—well, you get my meaning—because having done a similar thing last time, you cut it out. So I have made things easy for you. (*He writes a four page letter, and then calls it easy!*—Ed.)

DEMANDS EDITOR-HERO

4 Spring Street
Lubec, Maine

DEAR EDITOR:

Well, needless to say, I, like all the other "letter-hacks," was glad to see the Vizigraph retained, with new cut even! Now we, as Robert A. Bradley suggests, must make the column worthwhile, not only to ourselves, but to such dissenters as Mr. Hall, so that they may see as much worth in it as we do. But let's not cut out the fan-hacking altogether. 'Member those days of PS when La Vizi was hailed as one of the most entertaining letter columns? It took brains to concoct those clever missives and they still appear

once in a while. As they once said about Jack, all work and no play and so on. . .

Leigh Brackett is the only one that tops AOA and that wasn't too easy to do. I thought *Enchantress of Venus* (not too fitting a title but then, I can't think of a better one right now) was related to *Lorelei of the Red Mists* (Summer, 1946.—Ed.) and, by gosh! it was. Starke became Stark, the gal he got in the first story is missing, but it was essentially the same setting, and just as good as the previous yarn. I also noticed a tie-in or two with another story or two of hers . . . in another—unmentionable here—mag.

That covers #1 and #2 for the honors. The shorts were, I fear, not quite up to standard. *The Giants Return* was, for Abernathy, better than he's done before, except in the case of *Hostage of Tomorrow* which is his best PLANET story.

Ordeal in Space wasn't bad at all. In fact, it ties for third place with Abernathy's yarn and *Captain Midas* by Alfred Coppel. This last was almost one of the outstanding shorts but the shorts were so close, it was hard to decide. The other two tie for fourth place. Dee's yarn is worth the paper it's printed on but nothing more; same for *Signal Red* which has none too good a repolish of an old plot. Guth has done better by far. Wonder if Dee and Guth are real names. (See Curtis letter above.—Ed.)

Illustrations were for the most part not outstanding, nor were they as good as usual. You oughta use McWilliams more. His pic for *Midas* was swell. That slash down the side of the ship floating out there in space . . . the men fighting . . . swell! Who did Brackett's illustrations? Look familiar. . . Vestal? (No, Earl Mayon.—Ed.) He isn't bad at all but I would like to see more McWilliams! D'ya hear that? McWilliams! McWilliams!! McWilliams!!! More! (Selfish cuss, ain't I!)

Guess I'd better choose A. A. Gilliland for #1 boy. He tries so hard and doesn't do bad at all. Roy Wood takes second and Howard Keltner takes third. Roy Wood has an interesting idea in this hero business. There have been non-American, non-Anglo-Saxon heroes, although none too often. Bradbury had an Italian-American hero who did okay. Then there've been alien heroes at times too. And this editor-hero idea isn't bad, either. Maybe I could work on this myself. Now who would be the editor? Can't be obvious about this, so I'll reverse his initials to throw you off the track. PLP would be . . . hummm, didn't work, did it? (I'm a hero to my mother.—Ed.)

STFanatically,

Ed Cox, the Maine-iac

VIZIGRAPH PROZINE?

U. S. Army Signal Corps
Fort Monmouth, New Jersey

OKAY:

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I paid over eighty cents of Uncle Sammie's coin.

Now I'm (obviously) writing.

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than the stories in the front of the book. However, as Mr. Smith remarks, the type of thud-and-blunder that PLANET features will always have a buying public, so why change the type of stories and lose part of your circulation?

Anyway, first place goes to Henry Hasse for a very informative as well as interesting bit of prose. So he's a pro? He probably likes originals as well as everybody else.

Number two goes to Sigler for stressing a very obvious point. A steif author should know of what he's writing. Suppose a western writer started using (to be utterly fantastic) hand grenades in a pre-Civil War bit of banter. Do you think a western fan would keep quiet?

Third goes to Shawl for a rather amusing letter, which had some very interesting ideas expressed. So be it!

The best story in the ish according to my somewhat warped opinion was *Action on Asura*. While the theme was old, the way of handling it was very entertaining. But the best character in the ish was (again to my somewhat warped opinion) the little monster in the Brackettelle. While the story itself was typically in the melodramatic vein that is usually stressed by PLANET's lead novels, Miss Brackett threw a few bits of very apt description in building up a picture of a very minor character.

Another very readable story in the ish was the *Abernathyarn*. Maybe I liked it because it was a bit different from PLANET's usual run of stories.

The pictures? The cover has become very stock, but to change the style would undoubtedly cause the cover to lose the appeal for the usual male who's looking for other fiction besides STF. The interiors were a little too sketchy, but p. 75 was a very nice action shot.

How would I suggest improving PLANET? I wouldn't. That's your job—it's the one you're trained in, and the one you're stuck with. Nobody likes an editor except the authors that sell him stuff.

But don't throw away La Viz. In fact, enlarge it if possible. Do I hear a roar of rage in the

background? Granted, it would cause the authors to lose space in PLANET but since the poll indicated that more of your readers desired La Viz retained, if you made the letter section bigger, more letters could be printed, and more people could see their names in print. This might even tend to increase circulation. Of course, according to that line of logic, one might ask about making PLANET a professional letter zine. This wouldn't work out so well. At least leave a few stories in for the fan to tear to twitching pieces.

But, PLANET, in spite of and because of its stuff and steif, has endured for lo this past decade, and I hope will endure for the next. Tho now without Bradbury, she'll come through anyway. (See above.—Ed.) Good Luck.

Crudely

CLARENCE L. JACOBS,
Pvt. U. S. Army.

HEAR, HEAR!

98 Queen Street North
Kitchener, Ontario

DEAR EDITOR:

Since you never bother to answer any of the questions contained in the letters, I think a good short story would put the space to better use.

—ROY WEAVER

PS:—I think your mag is great.

FORMULA FOR CONCEIT

1611 Ferry Street
Lafayette, Ind.

DEAR EDITOR:

As you no doubt are aware, the basic formula for conceit determination is C Me, M being mentality and c being ego. Beside the vast non-compromising, uncollective and enormous conceit of the average fan, however, this value pales into insignificance. The basic formula or fan-conceit (derived after much research) is fC=Me. The value seems small, but it works.

The only good thing about FIPS was my superb letter.

Modestly,

—A. A. GILLILAND

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